

Interview with a

DEAD EDITOR



From the author of *The Enchanted, Inc. Series*

SHANNA SWENDSON

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Shanna Swendson

Contents

Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Chapter 21
Chapter 22

Also by Shanna Swendson
About the Author

Chapter One

I'd feared I was heading to the middle of nowhere, metaphorically speaking, but I didn't realize it might be literal until I saw the "Stirling Mills, Population 3,500" sign on the side of the road without a single building in sight. The only hint of civilization was the road itself. "There's got to be a town around here somewhere," I muttered to myself as I drove down the lonely state highway. The first impression wasn't promising for a newspaper reporter. Unless the trees did something wild and crazy, there wouldn't be much to report on, and therefore there'd be no reason to have a newspaper. But, I reminded myself, getting a call about a job opportunity while I carried a cardboard box of my personal items to my car after half the newsroom was let go was a blessing, even if the job was in a nowhere town. I'd rather report on small-town news—even mildly interesting trees—than be unemployed.

The sign at least proved I was on the right track. I hadn't made a wrong turn and missed the town entirely. I must have gone at least half a mile farther down the road before I finally saw a building, what looked like a hotel under construction behind a massive brick archway over a grand entry gate. I figured it was some kind of rural resort. If you wanted to get away from absolutely everything, this would be the place to go.

My car's GPS piped up, telling me to turn left ahead, and I saw an intersection with a smaller road, a two-lane blacktop heading

into more nowhere. The road sign declared it to be the business spur of the state highway I was on. Half a mile down that road, I started to see signs of civilization, such as houses surrounded by lots big enough to count as small farms. Some even had horses and cattle in the fields between the houses and the road.

I reached an ornately decorated bridge with fancy iron railings and crossed a river. On one side of the road was an old building with a water wheel on the side and a sign in front saying “The Old Mill Fine Dining.” On the other side of the road appeared to be the town’s defenses, a row of weapons from a variety of eras, their barrels all pointed at the road. I hoped it was merely a veterans’ memorial and that I hadn’t stumbled into a war zone.

Now the town proper finally began. There was a grocery store on my left and a used-car dealership on my right, followed by a couple of churches, a gas station, a few fast-food places, a dollar store, and more houses. The traffic at a little past ten in the morning was minimal. I wondered if a town like this even had a rush hour. Probably more like a busy minute. I had to stop at a couple of stoplights, once even with actual cross traffic.

As I drew closer to downtown, the character of the town changed subtly. The buildings were older and less generic. The houses I could see on the side streets had porches and picket fences. I passed a school where I expected to see girls in poodle skirts and bobby socks and hunks in letter sweaters carrying their books up the front steps. Something in my heart cried out in recognition. It was the sort of school I imagined when I read the outdated teen novels I found in the base library as a kid. I had to force myself to keep driving instead of stopping to explore.

Downtown looked exactly like a movie set for an idyllic small town, with old brick and limestone buildings lining Main Street and the side streets. There were antique-looking lamp posts along the street, with planter boxes full of pansies and ornamental cabbages at their bases. American flags hung from flagpoles up and down the street. About half of the storefronts were full, unlike

most of the towns I'd driven through on my way here. Most of the businesses seemed to be antique shops and art galleries. My research on the town had suggested that there was an up-and-coming arts community, with artists drawn by the cheap studio space and low cost of living. I wondered how long that would last, if the artists would stick around or get tired of the town—or if the town actually accepted the artists.

It was good that there was no traffic because I slowed to a crawl so I could take in the sights. This town was straight out of those cheesy cable romance movies I watched when I got home from work to help blot out the ugliness I often had to see as a reporter. After a day spent writing about crime and corruption, I liked to curl up with a cup of tea and escape to a sweet little town where everyone knew everyone and looked out for each other, and the biggest drama was whether the town festival would go off without a hitch. I'd visited a lot of small Texas towns, but I'd never found one so close to my ideal image.

The GPS announced that my destination was ahead on the right and, sure enough, I saw “Stirling Mills *Gazette*” painted on the window of the building in front of me. I pulled in to the nearest parking space. After turning off the engine, I took a moment to collect myself and get my bearings, since I was about ten minutes early. Punctuality was good for a job interview, but being there too early might be annoying if it threw off the editor's schedule.

Across the street was an art studio, and although the morning sun reflecting off the window obscured the view, I got the impression that there was someone painting behind the window. The paintings on display in the other windows were bold modern works with intense colors, not the hazy, nostalgic landscapes I'd have expected to see in a quaint little town. Maybe they were serious about that arts community.

Down the block was an old-timey movie theater, complete with Art Deco neon tubing along the sign. The marquee announced that *His Girl Friday* was playing this week. I thought that boded well,

both for what life here might offer and as a good omen for interviewing for a reporting job. The old theater showing classic movies was yet another detail from my dream hometown. Growing up as an air force brat, I'd never had a real hometown. If I'd made a wish list for the kind of place where I'd want to put down roots, this was the town I would have created.

My throat got that tight feeling that usually means I'm about to cry, and I blinked rapidly to keep any inconvenient tears from forming. Had I finally found the home I'd always dreamed of? I'd been approaching this interview as a "what the heck" kind of thing, mostly good for practice and feedback, but not a job I'd truly take unless I had no other options. Now I actually wanted it. I was already imagining myself attending local events, reporter's notebook in hand, and spending my free time watching old movies at that classic theater, maybe with a hunky local guy. I reminded myself that the town probably wasn't that perfect. Nothing was. There would be buried secrets and hidden flaws, and the odds of there being a lot of hunky single men in a town like this were slim. This wasn't a TV movie.

Still, I wouldn't mind giving it a shot, and I wanted the interview to go well.

I got a wad of tissues out of my purse and gave my nose a good blow. I had an ill-timed bout of the sniffles, probably courtesy of that cold front that was approaching, blowing all the pollen and dust between here and Colorado in ahead of it. I was still a bit stuffy, but I thought I could get through an interview without sounding too congested. Fortunately, I wasn't interviewing for a radio reporting job. The quality of my voice shouldn't matter too much.

I checked my lipstick and hair in the rearview mirror. The hair was a lost cause, but I tucked a few stray curls back into the elastic band struggling to hold the whole mop in place. I picked up my portfolio and flipped through it one last time to make sure my résumé and clips were all there, unfastened my seatbelt, and

opened my car door. Although it was February, we were having a warm spell, so I didn't need my coat on top of my suit jacket. The interview would surely be over before the front blew through. In fact, if it was on schedule, I should be home by then.

I got out of the car, smoothed my slacks, dropped my keys into my purse, gripped my portfolio, and marched toward the newspaper office. Bells on the door jingled as I opened it, and it took a moment for my eyes to adjust to the dimmer light inside when I entered. The room was lit only by the sunlight coming through the front windows. The only sound in the room came from my footsteps on the wooden floor. It was the quietest newsroom I'd ever been in, probably because there were no people there.

Two desks faced each other on either side of the front door. One was completely bare, aside from a phone, and the other seemed to be in use, though it was cleaner than any editor's desk I'd ever seen. It had a fairly up-to-date computer on it, which was reassuring. A manual typewriter would have been more at home in the surroundings. The phone was a relic, a solid black thing with a rotary dial, with an actual Rolodex next to it. I knew a few older reporters who still had them, though more as an affectation than as something they used regularly. They liked a visual reminder of their wealth of contacts. The only other things on the desk were a couple of file folders and a legal pad. A chair was pushed up against the desk, making it look more like someone had left for the day than like they'd just stepped away for a moment. Behind the desk, against the wall, was a solid table topped by an old-fashioned hutch with cubbyholes that must have once been used to hold typed articles and pages ripped from a teletype machine. Aside from the computer, the whole room was right out of the 1940s. I felt like I should be wearing a fedora.

"Hello?" I called out. "Mr. Ogden? It's Lexie Lincoln. We had a ten-thirty interview."

There was no response. I noticed a door in the rear wall. Maybe this was just a reception area and the actual newsroom was back

there. I peered through the small window set in the door, but couldn't make out anything. I tried the knob, but it was locked. I knocked and waited for a moment. Nothing happened. I pressed my ear against the door and heard no sound from the other side.

I got out my phone and made sure I didn't have any messages about the interview being rescheduled or canceled. Nothing. I'd been a little early, but now it was definitely time for the interview. I considered it a strike against the editor. If he didn't treat my time as valuable for the interview, what would he be like to work with? Before I stomped angrily away, I pulled up my call log, found the last call from Stirling Mills, and touched that number to call the editor.

A few seconds later, a phone rang, but not the one on the desk. It was the standard-issue ringtone of a cell phone, and the sound came from behind the desk. I moved over there, skirting the side chair, and immediately took a big step back.

A body sprawled on the floor, its head lying in the middle of a small pool of blood.

Chapter Two

I'd like to say that I didn't scream because I'm just that tough, but the truth is I was too shocked to scream. I went on autopilot, as though I was running through a mental checklist of what to do when you find a body. The first thing I did was get out of there. I yanked the front door open so hard that the bells went into a frenzy. Safely outside and away from the body, I dialed 911.

"Stirling Mills Nine-One-One, what's your emergency?" a motherly voice answered.

Sounding steadier than I could have imagined, I said, "There's someone lying on the floor at the newspaper office. I don't know if you need the ambulance or the medical examiner, but there's a lot of blood. Oh, you need the address. Just a sec." I looked around to see if it was clearly marked somewhere on the building. If not, I had it in my car's nav system.

"That's okay, hon," the dispatcher's voice said in my ear, calm and reassuring. "They know where it is, and they're already on their way. You just stay put, okay?"

I heard sirens approaching, one of them from the police SUV heading toward me. "Okay," I said, my voice trembling a little. My brain and body had finally caught up with the situation. I'd stumbled upon a bleeding body, which meant my day had probably become a lot more complicated. Of course, calling for help had been the right thing to do, but now I was involved, for better or worse.

The SUV made a U-turn and stopped in the space next to my car, and I turned to see an ambulance approaching from the other direction. "They're here," I reported to the dispatcher.

"You can hang up now, then. Thanks for calling. Take care." Her tone of voice made it sound more like I'd called to check on Aunt Betty than to report a body.

A cop got out of the SUV. I was a little too addled to notice details, just a long stretch of khaki topped by reddish hair. "You called it in?" he asked as he jogged past me toward the newspaper office.

"Yeah."

"Stay right there." His tone made it an order, like he'd verbally put me in handcuffs to keep me from going anywhere. He jerked the door open and ran inside. The ambulance came to a stop in the street, blocking my car, and the medics jumped out and ran into the building with their kits. A moment later, the medics came out, moving more slowly, like there was no rush. Either the man inside was already dead or it was just one of those superficial head wounds that bleeds like crazy and he was going to be perfectly fine. Then again, a superficial head wound that bled that much would have required *some* medical attention. At least one of them would still be in there with him, patching him up. Which probably meant he was already dead.

I swallowed the lump in my throat. It wasn't my first time at a murder scene, but I'd always been there as an observer, not as a participant. Not that I had actually participated in this murder, but I had found the body, which gave me a role in this little drama. And the victim was someone I'd talked to, even if I didn't know him well. All that made this very different from any other murder I'd covered.

Murder was definitely not what I'd expected from this pleasant little town. I supposed it proved my point that there was likely something ugly behind these beautifully restored facades. No real town could be as perfect as those in the TV movies.

A few minutes later, another police vehicle arrived, and a woman wearing a jacket with “SMPD” printed on it got out, carrying a case. Did a town this size have a crime scene team?

After the woman went inside, the first cop came out and approached me. The name plate on his chest said “W. Mosby,” and he wore a lieutenant’s bar on his collar. He was at least an inch over six feet and loomed over me, but he had a lanky build, so he wasn’t quite as intimidating as someone that tall could have been. He was more of a string bean than a brick wall. His hair was a dark auburn that I imagined had been bright red when he was younger, and that, along with a scattering of freckles on his nose, also took away from the intimidation factor. He fished a notebook out of his breast pocket and clicked his pen, staring at me all the while. I stared back at him, looking him directly in the eyes. That turned out to be disconcerting because I couldn’t quite tell what color his eyes were. They were dark, so it was hard to see the color, but they definitely weren’t brown or black. For a moment, I thought they were blue, but then he turned his head slightly and they looked more green. He frowned and stared harder at me. With contact lenses that dried out easily, I was bound to lose any staring contest because I’d have to blink soon, but I didn’t want to give up until I absolutely had to.

When he glanced down at his notebook and jotted something, I gratefully blinked rapidly a few times. I couldn’t help but notice that there was no wedding ring on his left hand. It seemed there was at least one hunky single guy in town—or a married man who didn’t wear a ring, I reminded myself to keep my imagination from going into overdrive. “Okay, miss, I’ll need to get some information from you,” he said. “Name?”

“Alexa Lincoln. But I go by Lexie.” With a nervous laugh, I added, “Though I’m known in newsrooms as Lucky Lexie.” A split second after the words left my mouth, I regretted it. I was babbling. I never babbled. I sometimes blurted, but that was different. That was me saying what I was thinking at an

inappropriate time. But this was coming out without me thinking about it. And now I was even babbling inside my head.

He arched an eyebrow. “Lucky?”

“This sort of thing happens to me all the time. Stumbling upon a crime scene, I mean. If it was a crime. I guess it could have been an accident.”

“That’s lucky?”

Oh, shut up, shut up, shut up, I told myself. But I’d already started, so now I had to explain. “For the victims, not so much. But I’m a reporter, so getting to the crime scene first means I get the scoop. Not now, though. I’m not here to cover this. Don’t worry, I’m not working on a story.”

He gave me some serious side-eye before asking for my contact info. I gave him my phone number and address, then he said, “Now, please tell me what happened this morning.”

“I had a ten-thirty interview with Paul Ogden for the job of reporter and assistant editor at the *Gazette*. Which I guess isn’t going to happen if that was Mr. Ogden. Was it Mr. Ogden?”

“We’re not releasing the victim’s identity until we can notify next of kin.”

“I’m not asking as a reporter. I didn’t have the interview, so I don’t have a reporting job. I’m asking as the person who doesn’t know if I’m going to have a job interview because I don’t know if the person who’s supposed to interview me is dead or if he’s somewhere wondering why I’m late.”

“You were telling me what happened,” he prompted, pointedly not answering my question.

“Yeah. Well, I showed up for my job interview and went inside the office. The bells rang when the door opened, but nobody responded. I called out and got no answer, then tried the door at the back. It was locked. I tried calling him, and the phone rang in the room—a cell phone, not the landline on the desk. So I went around the desk to look and that’s when I saw him.”

“Was he alive at that time?”

"I don't know. I saw all the blood and knew it was bad, so I went outside and called for help."

"Why did you go outside?"

That gave me pause. I really didn't know. "Instinct, I guess? You step away to make a phone call. And I didn't want to contaminate the crime scene any further. If it was a crime scene."

"So you didn't check to see if he was alive?"

"No. I thought it was best to call for help right away, and you were already here before I even got off the phone, so I didn't get a chance to go back in and start first aid. I've taken a CPR class, and step one is always to call nine-one-one."

He nodded. "Right."

"He was dead, wasn't he?"

Instead of answering, he said, "You didn't notice the body right away?"

"It was maybe thirty seconds, so it's not like I ate lunch in there without figuring it out. He was lying behind the desk, and I couldn't see him from that angle until I moved forward."

"You didn't smell anything?"

"The blood was still wet. He hadn't had time to decay."

"There are other smells, like the blood."

I pointed to my nose. "Sorry, mountain cedar and whatever else is blowing in. I might have noticed a week-old corpse, but not anything more subtle than that."

"How well did you know Paul Ogden?"

I thought that confirmed the dead man's identity, but wisely refrained from saying so. "I spoke to him once on the phone. He called to arrange the job interview. That was it."

"He contacted you?"

"Yes, out of the blue. I'd never even heard of this town. But it was good timing because I just got laid off, along with half the newsroom."

"How did he know about you?"

"I have no idea. Maybe he read some of my work. I've been

writing for a major daily, and some of my pieces have been picked up by syndicates. The newspaper grapevine is pretty good. Every journalist in the state probably knew there was a big bloodletting yesterday. A metaphorical one, I mean. No one was actually murdered. Well, other than maybe here, and that was this morning.” I shook my head, trying to clear it. “Sorry, I’m babbling. I guess I’m a little shaken up.”

“I thought you said you stumbled upon crime scenes all the time.”

“I do, but I’m usually there as a reporter, so that gives me some detachment. With this one, I feel more like I’m involved. Not that I had anything to do with it. I just found the body and reported it. But it feels really different reporting it to the cops than it does when I’m writing an article.”

“Did you notice anything in the newspaper office?”

“Not really. I just glanced around a bit. There was a rotary-dial phone on the desk, which isn’t something you see much anymore. It didn’t look like there had been a struggle, or anything like that. The desk was weirdly neat for a newspaper editor. Either he’s gone paperless or he’d just tidied up. Or he was a freak. And the chair was behind the desk the way you’d put it when you leave for the day. I remember thinking that it didn’t look like he’d just stepped away for a moment, like to go to the bathroom or get some coffee. That’s why I tried calling him.”

“Did you touch anything?”

“I tried the door at the back of the newsroom, as I said. And I opened the front door from both sides.” Wincing, I added, “Sorry. I guess I smudged the prints of anyone who’d gone before me.”

That earned the first hint of something that might have been a smile. “You didn’t know it was a crime scene when you went in. Is there anything else?”

“Not that I can think of. I really wasn’t in there long.”

“How long were you planning to stay in town?”

“I just drove down for the interview. I was hoping to get back

to Dallas before that front hits this afternoon. They're talking about sleet, and I want to be off the road by then."

"Can you stick around for an hour or so? Once I'm done here at the scene, I'll need to get your fingerprints so we can separate your prints from anyone else's, and I may need to get a more formal statement. You could go get a cup of coffee or lunch, or something. You should still be able to get home before it starts sleeting."

"Um, sure, okay," I said with a shrug. Glancing at my car, which was blocked in by emergency vehicles, I added, "Do you have any recommendations within walking distance?"

"The Sideshow Diner is about four blocks that way," he said, pointing over his shoulder with his thumb. "You can't miss it. I have your number. I'll give you a call when I need you."

With another glance at my car and at the parking sign nearby, I said, "It looks like I'll be parked here more than two hours."

"Don't worry, we won't give you a parking ticket."

If I tried to look on the bright side, this gave me the opportunity to explore the town a little more—not that I really needed to, since the job interview wasn't going to happen. The storefronts were all full, no windows boarded up or empty. In addition to the antique shops and art galleries, there were a few restaurants, a bank, a bookstore, a couple of legal offices, a "business incubator" with an "opening soon" sign in the window, and an accountant. Every block had a charger for electric vehicles, which I thought was surprisingly forward-thinking for a town like this. Some of the banners hanging from the lampposts advertised free Wi-Fi downtown. The town was small, but it seemed to be thriving.

I felt a pang of loss for what might have been, since the job probably wasn't going to happen now. As soon as I thought it, I felt bad for focusing on myself when things were far worse for Paul Ogden and his family and friends.

As Lt. Mosby had said, there was no missing the Sideshow Diner. It looked like a car from an old circus train, brightly painted

and sitting in front of the railroad tracks at the edge of downtown. A building had been built around one end of it, providing steps and a ramp to the entry, with an awning striped like a circus tent over the door. I crossed the street and headed up the steps. As soon as I entered, a tall Black woman wearing a ruffled apron passed me on her way to the kitchen in the attached building. "Sit wherever you like. I'll be with you in a sec," she said.

Most of the booths along the car's windows were empty, probably because this was the lull between breakfast and lunch. The only patrons were a group of old men wearing bib overalls and flannel shirts who sat toward the back. I slid into the second booth on the side facing the town. A moment later, the waitress returned. "Now, what can I get you?" she asked.

"This is going to sound weird," I warned. "I'll pay for a cup of coffee, but what I really want is a big mug of boiling water. I do mean boiling, not just hot from a pot sitting on a warmer. I need steam, maybe a few bubbles still."

"What are you gonna do, throw it in someone's face?"

"No!" The last thing I needed was for people in this town to think I had homicidal tendencies. "I'm going to make tea."

One corner of her mouth turned up in a wry smile. "You coulda just ordered a cup of tea."

"I have my own tea bags."

"Oh, something fancy, like Earl Grey?"

"More like Yorkshire Breakfast Brew. I'm actually not a fan of Earl Grey."

"You take your tea seriously."

"I lived in England when I was a kid while my dad was in the air force. I developed a taste for proper tea, and most diners in this part of the world don't do it well. No offense."

"None taken. We don't get much call for hot tea here. I couldn't even tell you what brand of tea bags we have or how old they are. I'll get that water right out for you." I got the baggie of tea bags out of my purse and selected the kind I wanted. While I waited for

my hot water, I glanced around the diner. Above the windows were rows of black-and-white photos of a carnival from what must have been the twenties or thirties. Maybe this car really had been part of a circus train at one time.

The waitress returned with a mug that steamed appropriately. “Here you go. Is there anything else you’d like?”

“Just the tea for now. I may want lunch in a little bit.”

“Okay, give me a holler when you want something. Menus are in the rack there on the table.”

I dropped a tea bag into the cup and checked my watch to time it. The swirl of red from the tea bag into the water brought back a vivid mental snapshot of the body lying with its head in a pool of blood on the floor. I took a paper napkin from the table dispenser and a pen from my purse and sketched a stick figure version of what I remembered seeing. He must have fallen and hit his head on the corner of the table behind the desk. It had been the back of his head that had been hit, so he would have had to fall backward. The body had been in the wrong position for him to have slipped while walking. He looked more like he’d tumbled out of a chair, but the chair had been upright and at the desk rather than near the body.

I checked my watch again and removed the tea bag. I normally drank my tea with just a splash of milk, but after the shock I’d had, I figured I could use a packet of sugar, too. There were small containers of half-and-half on the table, which would do. After having made a fuss about the boiling water, I didn’t want to request milk when all I needed was a teaspoon or two.

As I sat there with the mug under my nose so I could inhale the steam and maybe open my sinuses a bit, I studied my crude drawing. I couldn’t see a way that Ogden could have fallen and hit the back of his head. If the chair was one that tilted as well as swiveled, maybe he’d been leaning back too far and it had tipped over, but that wouldn’t have been enough force to bash the back of his head in. All I could think was that someone had shoved him

hard enough to send the chair tilting back so that he hit his head. Whoever did it would have had to set the chair upright afterward, and they hadn't called for help. Paul Ogden might even have been alive for a while until he either bled out or succumbed to the head injury. And that made it murder.

I saw the waitress coming and quickly balled up the napkin. I didn't want to have to explain my murder sketch. "You still good?" she asked.

"Great," I assured her, probably a little too heartily. "The tea was just what I needed. Thanks."

She raised an eyebrow. "You made the tea. All I did was boil the water."

"The water was the perfect temperature. You wouldn't believe how rare that is." Feeling awkward, I took one of the laminated menus out of the rack. "I should probably get some lunch. What would you recommend?" It was a bit soon for lunch, but I'd had an early breakfast and was beginning to get hungry.

"Oh, it's all good. You won't find better chicken and dumplings anywhere, and they've been stewing since I got here this morning. We usually run out fairly quickly during lunch, so you're here at the right time."

"That sounds good. I'll have that, thanks."

"I'll get it right out for you."

When she was gone, I slipped my drawing into my purse and picked up the mug, wrapping my hands around it and reveling in the warmth. So, murder. With a newspaper editor, there were probably plenty of suspects and just as many reasons why someone would want him dead. I'd only skimmed the online edition, but I hadn't noticed any stories of the sort that tended to make enemies. There had been the usual reports on school activities and sports, a profile of one of the new artists in town, minutes from the latest city council meeting, and a review of a high school play. Unless one of the thespians had taken issue with the review, I couldn't imagine that any of that was worth killing over.

And yet, someone had.

Chapter Three

I must have been still frowning in thought when the waitress returned with a steaming bowl of dumplings because she asked, “Is something wrong?”

“No, just thinking,” I said.

“You might want to let these cool a bit or you’ll burn your mouth,” she said as she placed the bowl in front of me. “Is there anything else I can get you?”

“No, this looks wonderful, just like my grandma used to make.” Before she walked away, I had a sudden impulse to ask, “Do you know the newspaper editor, Paul Ogden?”

“He comes in here from time to time. Why?”

I doubted the cops wanted me spreading the word about the murder, especially since Lt. Mosby hadn’t even confirmed that it was Paul Ogden, so I said, “I’m in town to interview for a job at the newspaper, and I’m curious what people think about him and the paper.”

She paused, tilting her head to the side in thought. “Well, the newspaper’s great. We’re lucky to have it. A lot of towns this size don’t have papers anymore. As for Mr. Ogden, well, he’s not exactly a people person. He’s real particular about things.”

“Like wanting his tea water boiling?” I asked with an inward wince.

“Oh, honey, no, that’s nothing. You didn’t send it back when I got it wrong.”

“You didn’t get it wrong.”

Her response was a noncommittal, “Mmm-hmmm.” With a smile, she added, “You enjoy those dumplings, now.” She hurried to greet someone who’d just entered the diner, but I had a feeling she’d have found an excuse to end the conversation even if a patron hadn’t shown up. Was it that she didn’t want to talk about him, or was she practicing the principle of not saying anything if she couldn’t say something nice?

So, Paul Ogden hadn’t made many friends, at least not at the diner. I’d known a lot of editors who were somewhat lacking in the personality department, or perhaps were overly endowed with the wrong kind of personality. Working with someone like that in a big newsroom with a lot of other staff could be unpleasant, but bearable. Working one-on-one with him in a small newsroom with no one else to provide a buffer might have been impossible. Maybe I’d had a lucky break. I immediately felt bad for the thought. The man had *died*. I shouldn’t be thinking about how that benefited me.

I ate my lunch with a mental apology to my late grandmother for thinking that these dumplings were even better than hers. I might have been able to tolerate the boss from hell with access to food like this. I still hadn’t heard from Lt. Mosby by the time I found myself looking at the empty bowl and pondering how rude it would be to pick it up and lick it clean. The lunch rush had begun, and I didn’t want to take up a table after I was through eating, so I paid my check and waved goodbye to the waitress before heading out. If I wasn’t mistaken, the temperature had dropped a little while I was in the diner, and the wind had picked up. I hoped I could get done with the red tape before the front hit in earnest. It was a nearly two-hour drive back to Dallas, and I didn’t want to deal with sleet on top of city rush-hour traffic.

I headed back toward the newspaper office, still mulling the crime scene over in my brain. It would have taken someone pretty tall and strong to push Ogden and his chair at just the right angle for him to hit his head hard enough to kill him. I would hope that

would rule me out as a suspect, but this was a small town, and I'd done a few stories on people railroaded into prison when small-town cops couldn't be bothered to actually investigate a case—or when they were protecting someone local. I was an outsider, so I made a convenient patsy. Real small towns were seldom as welcoming to strangers as those in the TV movies.

Out of sheer paranoia, I considered my alibi. I knew I hadn't killed Ogden, but could I prove it? It all depended on the time of death. I'd driven down from Dallas, and my car's navigation system could probably show where it had been. My toll tag would also lead to readings on where my car had been. I wasn't sure I had evidence proving where *I* had been. There was that art studio across the street, where the artist had been sitting in the window. That person might have seen something and could vouch for my arrival. Besides, I wanted to get a closer look at that art. I headed purposefully down Main Street toward the studio.

On the other side of the street, the ambulance was gone, but the police cars were still there, and the whole area was roped off with crime scene tape. I reached the art studio and opened the door, only to find Lt. Mosby already in there, talking to a woman sitting in a wheelchair in front of an easel. The woman saw me before he did and said, "Actually, she looked like that."

The lieutenant turned to see me and glared. "Really?" he asked.

I froze. I'd come here hoping to get an alibi, not be fingered for the crime. What was she up to? I knew she hadn't seen me any earlier than when I found the body.

"She's the second one," the woman clarified. "The one who went in just before all the sirens. The other woman with curly brown hair and a black suit who walked by earlier was different. For one thing, she was wearing a skirt, not slacks."

I wasn't sure what she was talking about, but it sounded like she was clearing me, and the relief left me a little lightheaded.

"What are you doing here?" the lieutenant asked me. His tone and his glare suggested that he hadn't cleared me, no matter what

the artist said.

"I had lunch and still hadn't heard from you, so I was killing time. I noticed this studio when I got here this morning, so I thought I'd stop by and take a closer look at the art." I didn't manage to sound nearly as casual as I'd have liked. I was afraid I sounded like I was babbling again.

"You were doing your own investigation, weren't you? Making sure you had a witness to when you arrived."

"Okay, that, too," I admitted. "I'd like to get out of here as soon as possible." To the woman, I said, "Hi, I'm Lexie. Your work is really amazing."

"Thanks. I'm Ruthie. Don't worry about Wes. He gets cranky when there's crime."

She looked about my age, early thirties. Her legs were missing below the knees, and her muscular arms were circled in tattoos. I recognized the insignia of an army unit on her left bicep. "You were over in the sandbox?" I asked.

"Yep. Turns out there are worse things to step on than rattlesnakes. You served?"

I shook my head. "No, but my dad's retired air force. He was over there in the early days."

The German shepherd in a service dog vest lying under the easel yawned and slapped his tail on the floor. "I guess I won't be getting that newspaper profile Ogden kept promising," Ruthie said. "Which should eliminate me as a suspect, since I have no motive."

"I never considered you a suspect," the lieutenant said.

"Hey, how many other trained killers do you think there are within a block of the crime scene?"

"Trust me, I don't think you could have pulled this one off. But let me know if you think of anything. Now, Miss Lincoln, if you'd like to come with me to the station, we can do all that paperwork."

"Nice meeting you," I said to Ruthie on my way out the door. As we crossed the street, I fished my keys out of my purse and headed for my car.

“Wait a second!” Lt. Mosby said. “I’ll drive you to the station.”

“I was getting my coat. Have you noticed that the temperature’s dropping?”

He held out his hand for my keys. “I’ll get it. Where is it?”

“Front passenger seat. And what’s the deal, is my car a crime scene now?”

He raised an eyebrow and smirked as he looked at my keychain. “Four-leaf clover? I thought you were lucky.”

“Where do you think I get my luck?” Actually, it had been a gift from a colleague based on my nickname, but I didn’t feel like getting into it with him.

He retrieved the coat and handed it to me, but held on to my keys. “Do you have a navigational system?”

“Yeah. What’s this about?”

“Where were you around nine this morning?”

“About halfway between Dallas and here.”

“Then I’m sure a check of your nav system will verify that. We’ll do the paperwork for you to authorize that at the station, unless you’d prefer to make us get a warrant, which will take a lot longer.”

While he spoke, a woman approached, skirting the crime scene tape around the newspaper office. She had curly brown hair pulled into a high ponytail and wore a rumpled black skirt suit with a white blouse and ballet flats. I cleared my throat, and the lieutenant followed my gaze to see her. He glanced back at me, and I couldn’t resist a smug smirk. If you gave a description of me, it would fit her, as well: just below average height, average build, curly brown hair, blue eyes. But I didn’t think we looked anything alike. You could definitely tell us apart in a lineup. If Ruthie had described a woman in the vicinity at the relevant time, I could see why Lt. Mosby might have thought it was me. It was nice of this other woman to show up at just the right time to provide the visual aid.

“Excuse me, officer,” the woman said. I estimated her to be in

her mid-twenties, and she looked frazzled. “Is something going on at the newspaper office today?”

“Yes,” was all he said.

She fidgeted and wrung her hands. “Well, my boss has an appointment with the editor this afternoon.”

“It’s not going to happen. Who is your boss? And I need to get some information on you.”

“Me?” she squeaked, taking a step backward.

“Were you in this area around nine this morning?”

She frowned. “I guess so. I get to work around that time, and I walked past here.”

“Did you see anyone else around the newspaper office when you passed by?”

“Not that I recall.”

He pulled out his notepad. “Name?”

“Felicity Wilson. I’m an aide to State Representative Keaton.”

“The one who’s running for Congress?” I asked.

“Yes. He was supposed to meet with the editor at two to discuss getting an endorsement for the primary. It’s a small paper, but if a candidate can’t get an endorsement from his hometown paper, it doesn’t look good.”

“You can tell your boss that there won’t be a meeting this afternoon,” the lieutenant said. He got her contact info. While they talked, I shrugged into my coat. I really hoped we could get this over with soon. I needed to leave by two if I wanted to be home by the time the Dallas rush hour kicked in, and with that cold front hitting, I wanted nothing more than to be on my sofa, in sweatpants and fuzzy socks, with a big bowl of soup and a mug of hot cocoa. I hadn’t done any depression wallowing the night before after the layoff since I’d been preparing for a job interview. I felt I more than deserved it tonight.

The lieutenant wrapped things up with Felicity and sent her on her way before turning to me. “Now, let’s get to the station.”

“You aren’t going to bring her in for fingerprints and

questioning? She was the one here at the time of death.”

“She wasn’t in the newspaper office, so we don’t need to eliminate her prints. And I know where to find her. She’s not looking to leave town as soon as possible.”

He took a roll of crime scene tape from the back of his SUV and wrapped it around my car. “So, my car really is a crime scene?” I said.

“Just preserving the evidence. And making sure you don’t get a parking ticket.”

“Oh, okay.” But it was still unnerving.

He put me in the front passenger seat of the police SUV, much to my relief. The way he’d been treating me, the back seat behind the wire mesh wouldn’t have been out of the question. He didn’t strike me as the type to railroad an innocent person rather than actually stirring himself to do any investigating, though I wasn’t sure what type he was. I was usually pretty good at reading people, but he made the Sphinx look expressive.

The police station was only a couple of blocks away, on one of the side streets. It was newer than the rest of downtown, probably from the fifties rather than the turn of the century. It had that blocky mid-century civic building look to it, and the interior matched the outside. I suspected most of the furnishings were original to the building. The place felt oddly homey to me, probably because it reminded me of most of the offices where my dad had worked in the air force.

“Come this way,” the lieutenant said, heading through the lobby. He led me down the hall to what looked like the place where people were processed when they were arrested. There was a mug shot backdrop and a table with an ink pad. A technician there took my prints, then handed me a wipe to clean my fingers. I was still wiping away the ink as I followed the lieutenant to his office. I felt fortunate that they hadn’t taken my mug shot, though I supposed that could still happen.

He gestured me to a chair in front of his desk, and instead of

sitting behind the desk, he stood in front of it, leaning against it so that he loomed over me from up close. I recognized the intimidation tactic and tried not to let it get to me. “When, exactly, did you arrive in town?” he asked, diving straight into the interview. I hoped that meant it was just a formality. If he’d really wanted to soften me up and lower my guard, he probably would have started with casual small talk.

That didn’t help me relax much, but I tried to keep from showing any tension. “I think I crossed the city limits shortly after ten, but that’s miles from the actual town. What’s up with that?”

“You’d never been in this city before?”

“No. I hadn’t even heard of it before yesterday. What’s going on here? You don’t suspect me, do you? *I called you*. If I’d killed him, I could have just slipped out of town and no one would have been the wiser until someone else stumbled upon him.”

“Or you could have assumed that’s what we’d think.”

“This is ridiculous. I was an hour away from town when he died, from the sounds of things, and I have the opposite of motive. He was going to interview me for a job, and now that he’s dead, that’s not going to happen.”

He reached back and picked up a file from the desk. “Actually, according to this, you were already hired and would become editor when Ogden left, at which time you’d get a seat on the board that governs the newspaper endowment. That sounds like motive to me.”

Chapter Four

“What?” I blurted before it occurred to me that I might be in “don’t talk without a lawyer present” territory. All common sense flew out the window as my instinct to defend myself took over. “I haven’t even been interviewed for the job, let alone been offered it, and I certainly didn’t accept. Nobody’s talked to me about any of this. You don’t seriously think I killed a man—an hour before I got to town, which would be some trick—in order to move up from assistant editor to editor of a small-town weekly newspaper.”

“I’ve dealt with a murder over taking one of a man’s tacos without permission.”

“But that’s tacos! This is just a job.”

He almost, for a split second, smiled. “A job you said you needed, since you got laid off.”

“I got laid off yesterday. I’m not desperate yet. I’ve barely had a chance to update my résumé.”

“We have to cover all the bases and look at anyone who has a motive.”

“Well, the car’s nav system will show you where I was. And I’m sure my toll tag will register as being far from here at the time in question.”

“We’ll look into that. But it only shows where your car was. It doesn’t prove where *you* were.”

I took my phone out of my purse. “How about this?” I showed

him the map app on the phone that tracked my movements. "I was nowhere near here."

"Your phone was nowhere near here. I still don't know about you."

"You think I'm some kind of master criminal who came down here early this morning to murder the man who was going to offer me a job, just so I could get an even better job right away instead of someday in the future. And I had someone else bring my phone and my car later to provide an alibi, then I returned to the scene of the crime to pretend I was showing up for the job interview and called in about finding the body. Is that it?"

"If I were going to kill someone, that's probably how I'd do it."

I had to admit, it was a pretty good scheme. But I hadn't done it. I scrambled to think of any evidence that would show exactly where I'd been at the time of the murder. I hadn't made any phone calls while I was traveling, so they couldn't match my phone records to testimony from the person I'd called that I had, in fact, called them from the phone that was nowhere near the crime scene. Would any of the traffic cams have picked up an image of my face in my car? That made me think of something. "My neighbor has one of those doorbell cameras. I've always suspected he mostly uses it to creep on me, but it would show me leaving home this morning at a time that would have required a teleporter for me to get here quickly enough to have committed that murder."

"Or a helicopter."

"You seriously think it would be worth hiring a helicopter in order to be the editor of a small-town newspaper instead of the assistant editor?"

He gave another one of those almost smiles. "It might have been worth it not to have to work with Paul Ogden."

"I wouldn't know. I never met the man."

"That actually works in your favor. You'd have a lot more motive if you had." He sighed, and I got the impression of some

tension leaving his body. “We’ll look at your car and your cell phone records.”

“How long do you think it might take?”

“Maybe an hour for the car. We’ve got a technician coming in from Waco. The phone records depend on how responsive the phone company is.”

That still put me in the window to get home before the roads got bad. “Okay, let’s get going on that paperwork,” I said. “Where do I sign?”

I’d read and even written articles about being careful about giving the cops access to anything, but I knew I hadn’t killed Paul Ogden, and the sooner the cops knew that, the sooner I could get home. I read and signed everything handed to me.

Lt. Mosby was polite and made sure I understood what I was signing. As much as he played devil’s advocate to every attempt I made to protest my innocence, I didn’t get the impression that he really thought I’d done it. Surely he had to realize I was the wrong size and didn’t have the physical strength to have done what it took to kill Paul Ogden. I wondered if he was ticking off the boxes for the sake of someone else.

A short, stocky, balding man stood in the doorway and cleared his throat. “Is this the person you brought in on the Ogden case?” he asked.

“Miss Lincoln was the one who found the body, sir,” Lt. Mosby said. “I’m taking care of the paperwork.”

This must have been Mosby’s boss. I wasn’t impressed. He certainly looked like the kind of lazy small-town cop who’d railroad an outsider just to close a case—or, at least, the way that kind of cop was usually depicted on TV. Maybe I was being unfair to the man.

“You here from out of town, miss?” the boss asked, narrowing his eyes at me.

“Here to interview for a job. As a reporter. Because I’m a reporter. Along with most of my friends.” I hoped he’d be smart

enough not to try to stitch up a journalist and bring down the wrath of an army of truth tellers who'd blow the scheme wide open.

He didn't seem to notice anything weird about what I'd said, but Mosby started to smirk, bit his lip, and raised an eyebrow. "I'm getting the paperwork to verify Miss Lincoln's alibi right now, sir."

"Good. Good. We need to wrap this case up. I don't like having an unsolved murder on our books." There was an implied threat in his tone, but I got the impression it was aimed more at Mosby than at me. As the chief ambled away, I thought that explained why Mosby was being so diligent. Was he protecting me from his boss by making my innocence completely clear-cut?

But he looked at me like he found me suspicious. I wondered if he had X-ray vision. I felt like he was looking right through me, but not in a sexy way. He wasn't undressing me with his eyes. It was more like he was trying to figure out what made me tick and was totally stumped because he couldn't see the gears.

"Is there something else you want to know, something you haven't asked me?" I said.

He blinked in surprise. "No, why?"

"I just get a vibe like I don't add up to you. Really, I'm a what-you-see-is-what-you-get sort of person. I'm a recently unemployed reporter who came to town for a job interview and found my would-be new employer lying on the floor of his office in a pool of blood. That's it. I didn't kill him. I wasn't sure I even wanted the job, but I thought it was worth a shot to check it out. The town looks like it's pretty cool. I might even be able to live here. But it's not worth killing over."

He might as well not have heard a word I said. "I'll call your cell phone when I have results and let you know when you can leave."

I stood. "It's been great chatting with you."

"You can wait here in the lobby if you like, but the coffee's terrible."

Pulling my coat on, I said, "I don't drink coffee." And I suspected I wouldn't be able to get boiling water that didn't taste like weak coffee here. The tap water in the police station probably had a faint taste of coffee.

But when I stepped outside, I reconsidered. It was a lot colder than it had been just half an hour ago. Even with my coat on, I didn't want to go wandering in this weather. The wind had strengthened and was whipping around in a frenzy. I could barely stay on my feet. This was earlier than the forecast had called for the weather to change. At this rate, I worried about being able to get home. I pulled up the weather app on my phone and saw that the edge of the precipitation had passed the Metroplex, and it was moving closer, with temperatures rapidly falling even this far south. I hoped the cops hurried.

In the meantime, I needed to find somewhere to go to get out of the wind. I could go back to the diner and have dessert and tea, or I could go back to the studio and see what Ruthie had to say without a cop there. It was a dilemma. I bet that diner had excellent desserts, if the quality of the dumplings was any indication. But there were more important things than pie right now. I headed toward the studio. After all, I never did get a good look at Ruthie's art.

This time she was alone. Her dog started to get up when I entered, but apparently decided I didn't need to be escorted inside and lay back down. The studio was warm enough for Ruthie to work in a short-sleeved T-shirt, so it felt good in there after I'd walked a few blocks in the cold.

"I guess that front's coming in," Ruthie said.

"Yeah. A complete change of seasons in about an hour."

She gestured to the canvas on the easel. "That's what this one's about." It was an abstract work, but now that she mentioned it, I could see the concept of the cold front, with one side of the canvas in warm golds and the other in cold blues and grays.

"I like that," I said. "I must say, this isn't the kind of art I was

expecting when I read that this town was trying to develop an arts community.”

“You mean the cute postcard type stuff? There is some of that in the galleries. I have to admit that I don’t sell a lot here. I have a few galleries that rep my work in other places. But you can’t beat the cost of the studio space here, and it’s where my family lives. I’m pretty self-sufficient, especially with Fitz, but it doesn’t hurt to have family nearby. Are you moving to town?”

“I thought I might be. I came here to interview for the job of assistant editor at the paper, but, well, looks like that’s not gonna happen. And I think the lieutenant believes I’m the one who did it.”

“Wes is no dummy. If you didn’t do it, he won’t get it wrong.”

“Just out of curiosity, what did you see this morning?”

“I don’t stare out the window non-stop. Occasionally I have to look at the canvas and put paint on it. But I was looking out more than usual, since I was trying to capture the before and after of the front. Downtown’s generally pretty quiet on a weekday morning. There are some people who work here, but you only get people strolling up and down Main Street on weekends. Most of the people who work here park behind the buildings and go in the rear entrances. I saw the Reverend—make that former Reverend—Parker heading down the street on foot, which I found interesting. He must have been heading to his lawyer’s office. I think that might have been around eight. Danny Jefferson was wandering around aimlessly. He’s on administrative leave from the school, and I think he’s still stuck on teacher time, so he was up and about after seven. He just walks around all day. There were a couple other men I didn’t recognize. I saw that girl who fits your description but who looks nothing like you sometime between nine and ten.”

“Felicity,” I said.

“Yeah, I saw her come over there after you and Wes left from here. But I didn’t see a murder. The lights were out over there, so I

couldn't see a thing through the windows from the outside." I glanced across the street and saw what she meant. The windows might as well have been blacked out. She laughed. "You know, when I used to watch *Rear Window*, I always imagined I'd be Grace Kelly, and it turns out that I'm Jimmy Stewart. Except in my case, they know a murder was committed and I didn't see anything instead of me seeing a murder and not being able to get anyone to believe me."

"Speaking of old movies," I said, "I noticed they're showing *His Girl Friday* at the theater. Do they often show classics like that?"

"They actually have a pretty good mix—some classics, the occasional new movie, seasonal things. The community theater also uses it for a venue. There's a surprising amount of stuff going on for a town this size. If you still have a chance at the job, you might want to consider it. It's not as boring here as you might think."

"It's not as though I ever take advantage of everything Dallas has to offer. But I don't know about the job. Supposedly, the board already approved me, even though I never interviewed. I'm not sure what I think about that."

She gestured with a paintbrush. "Looks like they're checking out your car."

I turned to look across the street and saw that a dark van had pulled up next to my car. A police SUV took the space on the other side of it, and Lt. Mosby got out. He handed the guy from the dark van my keys, and that guy went to work. "Good, now they can show I was nowhere near here when Paul Ogden was killed, and I can go home," I said. Turning back to Ruthie, I added, "Thanks for putting up with all my questions."

"No problem. If you do decide to take the job, be sure to stop by."

With a wave at her, I headed outside and crossed the street to get to my car. "What are you doing here?" the lieutenant demanded when I reached him.

“I’m not interfering. I just want to be here so I can go the moment you’re done. That front’s coming through, and I want to get home before it starts sleeting.”

The technician signaled to the lieutenant, who gestured for me to stay back and went over to talk. A few minutes later, he returned to me, frowning. “What’s wrong?” I asked, my stomach giving a queasy lurch. The expression on his face didn’t look at all like he’d cleared me as a suspect and I’d be free to go. He was scowling like something really bothered him.

“I’m afraid your car’s GPS wasn’t able to tell us anything. It’s dead, along with your electrical system.”

Chapter Five

I felt like someone had yanked the sidewalk out from under my feet. “Dead? But how?” I asked, clenching my fists so my hands wouldn’t shake.

“I was wondering the very same thing,” Lt. Mosby said with a rather pointed glare. “They couldn’t get any data out of your system. They couldn’t even turn it on. Or start the car. Have you been having any electrical problems? Had any of your warning lights come on?”

“No! It was perfectly normal on the drive down. The battery’s fairly new, and I just had the car checked out.” This was the final straw, and I couldn’t make myself sound calm and rational anymore. “This is a nightmare! First I lose my job so the stock price will go up for investors. Then I get a job interview, but the guy is dead before I get here, and then I get suspected of the murder, but I can’t clear my name because the evidence in my favor goes missing and, for even more fun, my car gets trashed. Can this day get any better?”

“It’s about to start raining,” he said dryly, but I thought his face softened a little. There might even have been a dash of sympathy in his eyes.

“Do you really think I’d have destroyed the electrical system in my car just to delay you finding out where I was at the time of the murder by maybe a few hours? Do you think I’d have stranded myself in a small town where I don’t know anyone?”

“No, I don’t. But it does keep us from knowing where you were and when at the time of the possible homicide. So much for being lucky.”

“This isn’t a story, so it doesn’t count. But I also gave you access to my phone, toll tag, and neighbor’s doorbell camera. Why would I wipe my car when you’re only going to find the truth elsewhere eventually?”

“Where did you go after you left the police station?”

Now I really regretted not hanging around there. Gesturing over my shoulder toward the art gallery, I said, “I went to talk some more to Ruthie. I was with her the whole time, and I’m sure she could say she didn’t see me tinkering with my car. I gave you my keys.” I opened my purse and held it out to him. “I don’t have a spare key with me. You can search if you like. I don’t have a car fancy enough that I can open it with my cell phone.”

“That won’t be necessary. But I will talk to Ruthie.”

“So, now what? Are you arresting me?”

“I’m not arresting you, but I would prefer that you not leave town until I’ve verified your alibi.”

Just to make things even better, the first drops of cold rain began to fall, which meant the front would have really hit Dallas by now. Even if my car had been working and the police let me go, I’d have been stuck in town in rapidly worsening weather. “It doesn’t look like I’m going anywhere unless I want to go on foot. Where can I stay? I didn’t notice any hotels, other than that resort they’re building at the edge of town. Which could be a problem in the whole arts community tourism plan, just saying.”

“The motel is on the other end of town, on the road leading to Waco, and there are a few inns in the historic district. But you’re in luck. The newspaper editor job comes with an apartment over the office, and Ogden didn’t use it. The board has given permission for you to stay there tonight.”

I thought if he’d already checked with the board about me using the apartment before he knew my car was fried, he was

never planning to let me leave, but I refrained from pointing that out. “You’re going to let your prime suspect stay at the crime scene?”

“I never said you were the prime suspect. And you won’t have access to the crime scene. There’s a separate entrance, and the door leading to the press room will be locked, along with the door from the press room to the newsroom.”

I was ready to rant, but I didn’t have a lot of options, and the apartment was far preferable to the jail or getting sent to a motel on the edge of town. “Okay, but can I get something out of my car? I have an overnight bag in my trunk.”

“I thought you were only here for the interview.”

“I keep a bag in my car. You never know when you might get sent out of town on an assignment at a moment’s notice, and you never know if a quick trip will turn into a longer stay.”

He opened the trunk and retrieved my duffel bag. “I know someone who can take a look at your car. They might be able to figure out what happened, maybe fix it.”

“You should treat it like a crime scene now and dust it for prints to see who tampered with it.”

“You know, that’s a good idea,” he said, raising an eyebrow. I was sure he was mocking me. “Come on, I’ll take you up to the apartment. You could probably use a little peace and quiet.”

“You’re putting me in time-out,” I translated.

“The entrance is in back. I’ll drive you around.” He handed me my bag and opened the SUV for me. Driving around the block might have seemed pointless under ordinary circumstances, but the weather was getting worse by the minute. Rain was now falling hard and fast, and the dashboard thermometer showed it was barely above freezing. If it got any colder, there would be a real mess.

The newspaper office was in the middle of the block, so we had to go to the next street and then down an alley that ran behind all the buildings on that block. There was a small parking area, a

loading dock, and a one-car garage behind the newspaper building, with a narrow staircase leading from the side of the garage to a balcony outside a door on the second floor. I noticed lace curtains on the upstairs windows. Mosby parked behind the garage, and he took the bag from me when he opened my car door.

The stairs sloped gently up to the balcony, and the treads were nice and wide, with no-slip tape on them. The tape was peeling around the edges in places, like it hadn't been maintained in a while. Mosby unlocked the door and flipped the light switch just inside.

I couldn't help but gasp as I entered. The apartment was an Art Deco time capsule, with geometric silk wallpaper, curved tufted sofa, mirrored consoles, and a free-form coffee table. The place looked like it had been decorated in about 1932 and not updated much since then, aside from the flat-screen TV mounted on one wall of the living room. All done in shades of pale pink and mint green, it was a very feminine space, so I could see why Paul Ogden hadn't wanted to live there. The living room was small and cozy, just the right size for a single person, and there was a kitchenette with a bistro table at one end of the room. "I'll get the heat going," the lieutenant said.

"You know your way around here," I remarked.

"My dad used to look after Miss Lily, the previous editor, and I usually came along with him. She'd lived here since the early eighties, when Miss Jean, the editor before her, passed away."

"I take it Miss Jean did the decorating—and back when she first moved in."

"She must have. It was before my time."

He headed across the room to the thermostat and adjusted it. There was a rumble somewhere in the building, followed by the faint burning dust smell of a heater that hadn't been used in a while. I already felt warmer, but I was sure it was my imagination. Just being indoors out of the wind and rain helped a lot.

"There, that should be better," he said, brushing his hands

together like he'd done serious work. The stern cop suddenly looked a lot less severe, maybe even a little uncertain. "Well, I'll leave you alone to get settled. They used this apartment as a break room for the past few years, so there may be some snacks in the kitchen. Don't worry, the door from the press room is locked, so you don't have to worry about anyone barging in. They're between issues, anyway." He took a step toward me and added, "Don't go investigating. You don't need to. Trust me. I'll figure it out, and if you didn't do it, you'll be okay. I'll also deal with your car. I'll let you know when I find anything." He took a slightly crumpled business card out of his breast pocket and handed it to me. "If you need anything, you can reach me at this number, at any time."

I took the card and said, "Okay." It was up to him how he wanted to interpret that, but what I meant was that I'd received his message. I was in no way promising not to ask any questions around town. Even if I didn't want to clear my name, this looked like a possible story. I might not be on staff anywhere, but I might be able to sell it as a freelancer, and that might help get me a job.

He started to go, but turned back with one hand on the doorknob. "Be careful. If you didn't fry your car to hide evidence, that means someone else did. I don't think it just went dead on its own."

And that meant the real killer was trying to divert the blame to me.

Chapter Six

I knew that the lieutenant was only trying to rattle me enough to keep me out of his way, but I also knew I hadn't sabotaged my own car, so there was some truth to what he'd said. Someone didn't want me to clear my name—at least, not easily. Unless they were good enough to get to my phone records, toll tag records, and my neighbor's doorbell camera, I'd eventually have an alibi. This little stunt might actually have helped make my case with Wes Mosby. I didn't think he truly believed that I'd damage my own car and trap myself in town if I was guilty. But someone who'd slam a man into the corner of a heavy table and then set the chair upright and walk away might not always be the most rational thinker. The killer must have been panicking.

Now that I'd been out of the elements for a few minutes, I didn't feel quite as warm in the apartment as I had. The heater hadn't yet taken all the chill out of the air. With my coat still on, I headed into the kitchen alcove and saw a teakettle on the stove. I filled it and set it back on the stove to boil. A cup of tea would be just what the doctor ordered. I opened one of the upper cabinets to find a dinnerware set that probably had belonged to whoever decorated the apartment, with dainty teacups. The adjacent cabinet held a variety of mugs, most of them with promotional logos. I took the one in front, which advertised the county electrical co-op. As the lieutenant had said, there were snacks in the cabinets, giant plastic bins of pretzels and animal crackers. I got down the animal

crackers and poured a few into another mug.

Once the water had boiled and my tea was steeping, I opened my duffel bag and took out the old pair of jeans and sweatshirt I kept in there in case I found myself in a situation that involved dirty conditions when I'd dressed nicely. I changed out of my interview suit into the more comfortable clothes and a pair of socks. When my tea was ready, I was pleasantly surprised to find a small container of milk in the refrigerator, and it even passed the smell test—as far as I could tell with my stuffy nose. I took my tea and cookies to the living room and settled down on the sofa to think. The sofa's delicate satin was faded but otherwise in remarkably good condition, especially if this place had been a break room for pressmen. There was a faint odor of cigarette smoke that I was becoming increasingly aware of. Rain, and possibly a bit of sleet, pelted the windows, so I decided to tolerate the smell rather than trying to air the place out.

If all my efforts to prove myself innocent got stymied, my best hope would be to find the real killer, or at least some plausible suspects. I opened my portfolio to the notepad I kept in there, got out a pen and started making notes. Ruthie had seen Felicity, a former preacher, and a teacher on administrative leave near the newspaper office in the morning. It sounded like there were a couple of stories there, and stories went with a newspaper. Wishing I had a tablet or laptop with me, I pulled up the newspaper's website on my phone—with a connection to a surprisingly fast public Wi-Fi network—and entered the names Ruthie mentioned as search terms. I didn't get anything for the teacher, but it looked like the former reverend had been big news not too long ago.

It was juicy enough that it might even have made the paper in a bigger city. The pastor of one of the local churches had been caught embezzling church funds and using them to pay the rent on a house where he and the church secretary—the wife of one of the deacons—met to carry out their affair. The pastor was out on bond. I wondered if he'd been downtown meeting with his defense

attorney or divorce attorney. Paul Ogden had uncovered the whole thing after receiving a tip about the church's finances. Someone had contacted the newspaper to help raise money because the church's historic building needed repairs they didn't have the funding for. From there, Ogden had found that the church was missing funds, and he'd tracked real estate records and followed the pastor to find the love nest.

"Looks like we have motive, and he was downtown around the right time," I muttered, making a note. Ogden had destroyed the pastor's career and probably his marriage. Surely Mosby knew about this and was taking it into consideration.

I tried typing "teacher" and "suspended" in the search box, and there I did get a result. No one was named, but it mentioned that a student had accused a teacher of inappropriate behavior and that the teacher was on administrative leave pending investigation. The student hadn't complained directly to the school authorities, but rather had gone straight to the newspaper. I thought it spoke well of Ogden's ethics that he hadn't printed the teacher's name without verifying anything.

That was less of a motive for murder, since it looked like Ogden had handled it well, but it was possible that his investigation before writing his story had been what stirred things up. The administration wouldn't have known about it if he hadn't said anything. It seemed to me, though, that murder for revenge would be too big a risk for a teacher under investigation to take. Then again, he probably didn't have grounds for a libel lawsuit, since the paper hadn't printed his name, and merely asking questions in the course of an investigation wouldn't count as slander. If he had no recourse for retribution, the teacher might be frustrated enough to resort to violence. The killing could have been unintentional, the result of a violent impulse, and then the killer had fled instead of seeking help since he was already under investigation and couldn't risk more scandal.

I was sure Mosby was also familiar with this case, and in a

town this size he probably knew the teacher in question.

I didn't think Felicity was responsible for the same reason I made a bad suspect. We were both of a size that made it unlikely we could have done the deed. We weren't tall enough to get the right force in the right direction to cause that injury. I could have shoved the desk chair straight across the room, but then the corner of the table would have hit the back of the chair rather than his head. It would have taken pushing down and back to get the chair tilting at the right angle. Felicity's boss was in the same position I was, wanting a meeting with Ogden and facing a setback because it didn't happen, so she didn't have any reason to kill Ogden.

I'd heard about Clark Keaton. He was a rising golden boy in his party who'd held some lower-level offices before being appointed to the state legislature to finish out a term and who was now running for his party's nomination for this district's U.S. House seat. His main claim to fame was that he'd saved a girl from a wrecked car just before it burst into flames. Nearly every newspaper in the state had run the photo of him carrying the girl to safety with a Hollywood-worthy fireball behind him. That had vaulted him into the national spotlight and fast-tracked his political career. He'd even become an Internet meme, with people editing in Superman's costume beneath his shirt and tie or showing him rescuing all kinds of people and things. The meeting with his hometown newspaper editor to get an endorsement was probably just a formality.

That was it for what I knew, based on who'd been seen in the vicinity at the proper time. There was no telling how many other enemies Ogden had made in town—probably a lot, if his reporting on the church scandal was indicative of his work. I scrolled through the past few months of issues, and while Stirling Mills was no den of iniquity, he'd certainly managed to uncover every bit that was there: sexual harassment accusations against city council members, a bogus charity raising funds for cancer treatment for someone who turned out to be in perfect health, the president of a

youth sports league who spent league funds on a Cadillac for himself. Any of these people might have been angry enough to kill.

Then there was whatever he might have been working on that hadn't yet gone to print. That would be an even bigger motive, killing to stop a story from getting out. It was too bad there was no way I could get into the newsroom to dig around.

The whole time I worked, the scent of cigarette smoke grew stronger, like someone was leaning over my shoulder while chain smoking. It was definitely cigarette smoke, not the building burning. I had to be imagining it. I doubted any crime scene techs who might be working downstairs would be smoking on the job. As stuffy as I was, I was surprised I could smell it at all. Then again, I did seem to be breathing better. The rain must have cleared the air of all the cedar pollen.

I got up and went through the door at the back of the living room, which led to a bedroom that was as much an Art Deco fantasy as the living room was, complete with upholstered headboard and mirrored dresser. A bathroom opened from there. On a shelf under the pedestal sink I found a slightly rusty can of air freshener. I brought it to the living room and sprayed the place liberally with "summer meadow." The smell was cloying, but it wasn't as bad as the smoke.

When I took the air freshener back to the bathroom, I paused to push aside the lace curtains in the bedroom and look out. I was just in time to see my car being loaded onto a flatbed tow truck, supervised by Wes Mosby. I wondered how much this little adventure was going to end up costing me. Instead of getting a job and earning money, I was going deeper into the hole.

I heard a knocking sound and hurried to the apartment's front door. Keeping the lieutenant's warning in mind, I peered through the door's half-moon window and saw a trio of elderly women standing on the balcony. I doubted they were the real killers who were here to do away with me and frame me for Ogden's murder, so I opened the door. "Hi?" I said, turning the greeting into a

question. In other words, “Who are you and what are you doing here?” but less direct.

The middle woman said, “Miss Lincoln? I’m Evelyn Novak, and this is Lupe Alvarez and Patricia Peete. We’re the *Gazette* Foundation Board, and we’re here to welcome you to town.”

I wished that I hadn’t changed out of my interview suit. Which was still lying across one of those streamlined chairs. I hadn’t even been here an hour and the place was already unsuitable for visitors. But I couldn’t leave them standing on the balcony in this weather, so I stepped back from the door and gestured them inside. “Please, come in,” I added. It was a mere formality, as they’d already entered as if they owned the place. In a way, I supposed, they did. “I wasn’t expecting company.”

“We don’t mean to intrude,” Evelyn said. She was dressed like Queen Elizabeth was her fashion icon, with an A-line coat buttoned all the way up, structured handbag, little hat, and square-heeled pumps. “We don’t expect you to play hostess.”

“This is probably a bad time,” Patricia said. She wore a bright pink ski suit. The fur-trimmed hood of her jacket was pushed back, revealing short white hair that either was tinted a light pink or reflected the color of her clothes.

“Murder is such an ugly way to start your tenure here,” Lupe added. Her salt-and-pepper hair was pulled back in a tight chignon, accentuating her high cheekbones. She was dressed entirely in black, with dramatic winged eyeliner and intense red lipstick, giving me the impression of a retired flamenco dancer.

I’d have guessed that their average age was somewhere between seventy and eighty, and they’d have been perfect casting for the three witches in a production of *Macbeth* set in a small Texas town. If they started speaking in unison, I’d be out of there.

“I guess you’re the ones I have to thank for getting me suspected of homicide,” I said.

“Us?” Evelyn asked, her eyes widening behind her thick, large glasses.

“You gave me what the cops see as a motive. It would have been obvious that I had no reason to want to kill the person who was interviewing me for a job before he could offer it to me, but then they found all the paperwork not only giving me the job, but making me the editor and giving me a seat on the board if he left. That made it look like I stood to benefit from his death.”

“I said we were jumping the gun,” Patricia muttered.

“But you don’t understand,” Lupe said, her voice a deep purr. “Paul was leaving. He submitted his resignation weeks ago. He merely had to hire his replacement before he could go. You would have been hired as assistant editor, yes, but if you worked out at all, he would have left, and you would have become editor. We thought that making it clear you were in line to be editor after a probationary period would make it more likely that you would accept the job, so we put it in writing.”

They were right about that, even if the circumstances had twisted their desired outcome. They couldn’t have known the editor was going to be murdered. Or could they? “Do the cops know this? That Ogden was leaving and that I’d have had the editor job soon anyway?” I asked.

“We’ll tell them right away,” Evelyn said. “But I hope you won’t hold this awful situation against us or the town. You really are the perfect fit to be the *Gazette*’s next editor.”

Being hired, sight unseen, before the interview might have been even weirder than finding my prospective boss’s body. I shook my head, baffled. “You don’t know me! I can’t believe you put all that stuff in writing before I even had a job interview.”

“We’ve been following your work,” Lupe said. “You were the perfect candidate. When Paul learned through the newspaper grapevine that there were layoffs, he got in touch with you right away.”

“Before I even made it to my car after being escorted out of the building,” I said. I couldn’t think of what I’d written that would have made anyone put me at the top of the wish list for the editor

of a small-town newspaper. I had done a couple of stories about events in smaller communities, but nothing that got that much attention. The one piece I'd written that went viral was a feature on a supposedly haunted small-town restaurant.

I smelled the cigarette smoke again, breaking through the artificial floral scent of the air freshener. I waved a hand, trying to clear it from around my nose. "Sorry about the smell," I said. "I think the pressmen must smoke in here when they're using it for a break room. I can't seem to get rid of the reek of cigarette smoke."

They glanced at each other. Evelyn smirked for a split second, and Patricia said, "I don't smell anything."

"One of the former editors used to smoke, a long time ago, and the scent may still permeate the apartment," Lupe said. "You must have a very sensitive nose. Before you move in officially, we will have the apartment professionally cleaned. And then I'm sure no one will smoke in here and it will all be fine." She said the last sentence very pointedly, as though she was giving orders. That made me wonder if one of her fellow board members was the culprit and she'd been smoking in the apartment. If Patricia didn't smell it, maybe it was because she was desensitized to smoke.

I held up a hand in a "stop" gesture. "I haven't accepted the job. It hasn't even been officially offered to me, since I never made it to the job interview. And I don't think a murder suspect makes a good candidate for editor of the town newspaper."

"You're not really a suspect, dear," Evelyn said. "Wes is merely covering all the bases. He's thorough that way. If you didn't do it, trust me, he'll know. You haven't been arrested. Most of the town doesn't even know what happened."

"Why was Paul Ogden so eager to leave town?" I asked. "It seems like this job was essentially a lifetime appointment for the past couple of editors, but he wasn't here all that long."

"I don't think he was as good a fit for the position as we'd hoped," Lupe said delicately.

"It doesn't sound like he made a lot of friends here," I

remarked.

“I doubt he made a lot of friends anywhere,” Patricia said with a snort. “Great reporter, but not much in the way of people skills.”

“I don’t think he truly grasped the concept of community,” Evelyn said.

“I’m not sure I’m what you’re looking for,” I said with a laugh. “I’ve never lived more than four years in one place in my life.”

“You just haven’t found where you belong,” Patricia said. “When you do, you won’t want to leave.”

“This is a place that calls to people,” Lupe added. “It brings its children home, from wherever they may be.”

That was a nice thought. It implied that even though I hadn’t grown up there, it might still be my spiritual hometown, the place where I might belong. But I might never have that if the people in the town had the slightest suspicion that I’d killed my predecessor to take his job.

If I wanted this job, this cute apartment, this town, I needed to clear my name.

Chapter Seven

The three weird sisters left soon afterward, promising to tell the police that Paul Ogden had been planning to leave town, so I could have had his job without killing him. I didn't know what good it would do me. If I didn't know he was planning to leave, then that wouldn't have stopped me from killing him to take his job. That was, if I were the sort of person who would kill to get a job, which I wasn't. The suspicious gleam in Lt. Mosby's eyes when he looked at me was starting to make me doubt myself. I had to mentally rewind my morning to remind myself I hadn't killed anyone.

I sat on the sofa and picked up my mug of tea, long since gone cold. I knew innocent people got sent to prison all the time. I'd done enough stories about people being exonerated, sometimes because new technology like DNA cleared them, and sometimes after evidence of police or prosecutorial misconduct came to light. I'd just always believed it wasn't the kind of thing that would happen to someone like me. Not that I was being railroaded into jail, but the first piece of evidence that might have cleared me, or at least provided reasonable doubt, had been wiped out. What if something happened to all the evidence in my favor?

I picked up my phone to do more research, but my battery was running low. I went to get my charger, only to realize that my charging cable was in my car, where it wouldn't do me much good. I kept a wall adaptor in my bag, but since I had a cable for the car, I didn't have a separate one for the bag, and I'd totally forgotten to

get it. I'd never before found myself in a situation in which I couldn't get to my car. I wondered if there was any place in walking distance where I could buy a cable, but I hadn't seen so much as a convenience store in the downtown area, and with sleet now coming down pretty hard, I didn't relish the idea of wandering around in search of a store.

For lack of anything better to do, I got up and began searching the apartment. Maybe I'd find some clue about something in there, whether it was to suggest an enemy Paul Ogden might have made or just to give me some sense of the lives of the previous editors.

It really was a cute apartment, and no smaller than where I currently lived. The kitchen was tiny and old-fashioned, but microwaving frozen dinners didn't require a lot of room. The bedroom and living room were bigger than in my current apartment, and I discovered that there was a huge walk-in closet. I pulled the string on the bare light bulb on the closet ceiling and saw stacks of banker's boxes. Bingo! Ogden must have been using the closet for storage while the apartment was unoccupied, though some of the boxes on the bottom of the stacks looked like they predated his tenure.

I hesitated for a moment, since there was a chance that something in these boxes could be evidence, but if it was, it was already compromised from being left alone in the apartment with me. The boxes weren't sealed. With a shrug, I took the lid off one of the top boxes, since more recent information was more likely to be relevant to the murder. It proved to be full of letters to the editor—actual mailed letters, still in their envelopes, which had been slit open. "How quaint!" I said. My former newspaper had gone to a strictly online system years ago.

Just the first few letters I skimmed through significantly added to the suspect pool. People in this town did *not* like Paul Ogden. I wondered if these were merely the local cranks who wouldn't be happy with anyone or if he'd been that bad. If he'd been that bad, I wondered if his planned departure had been his idea or a strong

suggestion from the newspaper board.

I finally came across a letter that wasn't angry, but it wasn't about the newspaper. It was praising another citizen for a good deed. There was a red *P* marked on the envelope—maybe to mean it had been printed. Otherwise, people thought Ogden had misquoted them, ignored their important event, relegated their important event to the back page, endorsed the wrong candidates for mayor and city council, printed a photo of their child without permission, hadn't printed a photo of their child who was clearly the star of the event in question, never covered good news, let the city council get away with everything, was too negative about the city council, treated church events like real news, and was anti-religion. The editor in this town probably couldn't win. Someone was always going to be unhappy, and when they didn't like the man, they were more likely to be critical of his work. Could I do better? Would I get myself killed for criticizing the wrong person or institution? I didn't get the impression that Ogden was bucking any kind of town groupthink. They disagreed with each other as much as they disagreed with him.

At the bottom of the box was an envelope with no return address and a big, red star marked on it. Inside was a single sheet of school notebook paper with the words, "Mr. Jefferson at the high school molested me last Tuesday when he asked me to meet him after school to talk about my project," written on it in a girlish hand in purple ink. If Ogden had named the teacher to the administration when following up on the anonymous tip, it would have ruined the teacher's life even if the newspaper never mentioned his name. Just asking the question of an administrator would have set things in motion. Since I felt like I was under suspicion, I sympathized with Danny Jefferson. I could even understand how that could lead to murder. I pictured a scenario that fit the crime scene: Jefferson came to the newspaper office to confront the editor, the editor was smug about his civic duty, possibly pointed out that the paper had never printed Jefferson's

name, so he couldn't sue for libel. In a rage, Jefferson grabbed him and shoved him, throwing him back so that he hit his head and fell. In a panic, Jefferson set the chair upright, then fled.

The smell of cigarette smoke was worse in the closet than it had been in the living room, so I picked up the next box and carried it out to the bedroom. I set it on the nightstand and sat on the bed, where I could look out the window as I worked. From this angle, I should be able to see any police cars heading to arrest me.

This box was labeled "Misc." and looked like what you'd get if you shoved everything off a desk into a box every so often. That might explain the strangely clean editor's desk. I wondered if I should share my find with the police, since I was sure they were searching for clues in the office. The box contained unopened junk mail, newspaper clippings with notes scribbled on them, memo slips with phone numbers scrawled on them, paid invoices, and a photocopy of a newspaper article. That article was about the death of a high school valedictorian on graduation night nearly twenty years earlier, long before Paul Ogden came to town. The byline on that story belonged to Lily Ferguson. Wes Mosby had mentioned a Miss Lily. I wondered if she was the smoker.

Speaking of smoke, it now smelled like someone was chain smoking in my face. Was it the paper that had absorbed smoke? I leaned over the box and inhaled. It just smelled like paper, maybe a little musty, but not smoky. It was the apartment, not the paper. They'd definitely have to deep clean this apartment before anyone at all sensitive to smoke could live in it.

I put everything back in the box. There must have been a draft because that photocopy fluttered out of the box and onto the floor. I picked it up and put it back in, then slammed the lid on tight and carried the box back to the closet. The stack of boxes in there was daunting, and I hadn't learned much, so I didn't know if it was worth the effort to dig any further.

I checked my watch and saw that it was getting close to dinner time. As bad as the weather had turned, I thought it would be a

good idea to have dinner early and get back to the apartment before it got even worse. I found the remote for the television on an end table and turned it on to see if I could find a weather report. Either there was cable or a good antenna because the Dallas stations came in clearly. I flipped to a Waco station for something a little closer. The early news had just come on, and the weather was the story of the day. The sleet was only going to get worse as the weather system came through. They showed footage of Dallas highways that looked like the bumper cars at the fair. Maybe whoever wiped my car had done me a favor. I'd have hit the city at the same time as that mess. It didn't look like I'd be home the next day, either, since it wasn't supposed to get much above freezing for more than thirty-six hours. I was lucky I had a place to stay.

I turned off the TV and put on my sneakers, which had better traction than my professional loafers, and my coat. I had gloves in the pockets, and there was a stocking cap in my go bag. I was ready to face the elements. It would have been nice if they'd let me use the interior stairs, but the exterior stairs were fairly sheltered and weren't too bad. When I came out of the alley to the side street, the full force of the north wind hit me like a brick in the face. As good as those dumplings had been at lunch, I didn't want to walk all the way to the diner. I needed something closer.

On Main Street, I saw a neon cactus in the window next to the movie theater, and the neon sign over the awning said "Margarita's." Yes, that was exactly what I needed, Mexican food and a margarita. I ran across the street and hoped that the lights being on meant the restaurant was open. Much to my joy and relief, the door opened, and I stepped inside to warmth that smelled of chili peppers and cheese. In other words, a Texan's idea of heaven.

There were small tables scattered around the middle of the floor and booths around the perimeter, but I made my way to the massive wooden bar at the back of the restaurant. I wouldn't feel quite so alone sitting there. I climbed onto a barstool, pulled off

my gloves, and slipped out of my coat, letting it hang over the back of the tall chair. A dark-haired woman about my age came over to me with a smile. “Hi. Thanks for coming in tonight,” she said. “I was worried I wouldn’t have too many customers. No one wants to go out in this.”

“I didn’t have much choice,” I said. “I’m just glad you were open.”

“Can I get you something to drink?”

“I saw ‘Margarita’s’ on the sign, and that’s what I want. A strong one, if you can.”

She winced. “Sorry. The town’s dry, so we don’t actually serve margaritas. I’m Margarita, and I named the restaurant after myself in a fit of ego that I’ve come to realize might amount to false advertising.”

Of course. I shouldn’t have expected anything different, the way the day had already gone. “Oh, duh. You’d think I’d know the difference between a possessive and a plural, since that’s my grammar pet peeve.”

“You, too? Trust me, I’ve seen enough signs to know that was a safe assumption to make.”

“I’ll just have some water, then. And chips and queso to start with. Can you do a single portion so I’m not eating enough for two people?”

“Sure thing. I’ll get that for you. In the meantime, here’s a menu.” She slid a vinyl-clad folder across the bar toward me.

I pored over the menu, trying to decide which variety of comfort food I wanted to go with—creamy chicken enchiladas, cheese enchiladas drenched in chili and topped with even more cheese, maybe a combo plate. I was still trying to decide when Margarita returned with a cup of cheese still bubbling around the edges and a basket of tortilla chips. “Oh, yeah, that’s just what I needed,” I said, reaching for a chip.

“Have you decided what you’d like?”

“Not really, so I’ll get the number four combo plate that has

some of everything.”

“Excellent idea. It may take a little while. I’m short-staffed tonight. I didn’t make anyone come in who didn’t feel they could get home safely. So it’s just me out here and my cousin in the kitchen.”

“Not a problem. I have queso. And it’s early for dinner. I just came out because I couldn’t stand hanging around where I was anymore. Oh, speaking of which, would you happen to have a phone charger here?”

“What kind?” I showed her my phone. “Yeah, that’s the same kind I have.” She took it from me and plugged it in at the little desk behind the bar as she called out my order to the kitchen through the pass-through window, then returned to me. “Did you get stuck here by the storm?”

“Not exactly. I came to town this morning for a job interview, but that ended up not happening.”

“At the newspaper?”

“Yeah. How’d you know?”

“My grandma’s on the board and she mentioned you coming in. I don’t know how many other job interviews there would have been around here today.”

“I think I met her this afternoon. I don’t suppose she was ever a flamenco dancer, was she?”

“Close. She’s a classical guitarist. Grandma can shred. I guess after the death you got caught up in the investigation.”

“Apparently as the prime suspect. And on top of that, my car got fried. If I’d had a normal interview this morning, I’d have been home before the front hit, and right now I’d be in my fleece pajamas on the sofa, watching sappy romantic movies on cable and eating soup.”

“I love those,” she said with a sigh.

“This town is right out of one of those.”

“Really? You think so?”

“The downtown area looks like a movie set.”

"I guess it does." She grinned. "And you're the city girl, stuck here by the storm."

"Let me guess, the next person to walk in will be a dashing single dad. What does your town doctor look like?"

"Not like a handsome, eligible widower, alas." She frowned as though in thought before saying, "Hang on a second," and disappearing into the kitchen. I dipped a chip in the gooey cheese and studied the room as I ate. This restaurant wasn't circus-themed, but it had the same kind of black-and-white photos of a circus or carnival hanging on the walls as the diner had. Some of them might even have been the same photos as in the diner.

Margarita returned with a salt-rimmed glass filled with a pale greenish liquid. "I can't sell alcohol, but there's nothing that says I can't give drinks to my friends, and if anyone ever needed a drink, it's you. It's on the rocks because I don't have a blender that isn't used to puree roasted peppers, but I hope this helps."

I took an eager sip. It was sweet and tangy, with a bit of a kick. "You may just be the best friend I've ever had. Thank you."

"I know you didn't get the best start here, but are you going to stick around? Grandma and her friends were really excited about you taking over, though they were hurt that you thought they got you suspected of murder."

"But they did. They gave me a motive."

"When someone's coming in for a job interview, you don't expect that you'll have to worry about what happens if the person they're supposed to replace gets murdered."

"True," I conceded. "But their recruitment methods were a bit unorthodox, and I'm still not sure why they think I'm the person for the job. I've never edited before, aside from being an assistant editor on the high school newspaper. I'm a reporter."

"On a paper this size, that's mostly what you are. You just get to decide what to write about and where to put it. There are production people who do the real layout and handle the printing, and there's someone who sells ads. A few freelancers cover things

like sports and take pictures, and one of the English teachers does the copyediting so you don't have to proofread your own work."

I threw up my hands in frustration. "Why couldn't someone have told me this? In all the talk about me taking this job, nobody's told me any of the actual details. They just talk about me being a good fit and how the job comes with an apartment—which reeks of smoke, by the way."

"That's because the person who was supposed to tell you the nitty-gritty details got killed before the interview."

A blast of cold air hit me in the back, and I turned to see the door opening. A man bundled up in a sheepskin jacket entered and pushed the door shut behind him. He pulled off his hat, and I groaned when I realized it was Wes Mosby. I hoped he let me finish my margarita before he arrested me.

Chapter Eight

I only relaxed a little when Mosby unbuttoned his coat and I saw that he was out of uniform. His heavy fisherman's sweater stirred up a different kind of tension. There's just something about a man in a sweater like that, soft and rugged all at the same time—and right out of one of those romantic movies. I turned away before I could look like I was staring and took a long sip of my drink to cool my jets. It wasn't Christmas, I reminded myself, so he wasn't going to take me to shop for a tree and drink cocoa.

"Oh, good, you found it," he said as he took the seat next to me. "I was going to suggest you come here for dinner, since it's the closest place to the apartment, and it's a good night for Mexican food." Turning to Margarita, he added, "I'm glad you're open."

"Barely. We're on a skeleton staff tonight," Margarita replied. "But then again, we have a skeleton crowd."

He glanced at my drink, then said with a wink, "I don't suppose you have anything you'd like to share with a good friend."

"I guess you've had almost as rough a day as Lexie," she said. I didn't remember introducing myself, but it sounded like her grandmother had been talking about me, so apparently an introduction was unnecessary.

"It's been awhile since I had to deal with a murder case. Not my favorite way to spend a day."

While she went off to make his drink, I said, "I would offer to share my chips and queso, but would that look like I was trying to

bribe you?"

"I think it would just count as being neighborly," he said, reaching over, snagging a chip, and dipping it in the cheese.

"I've been double dipping," I said.

He hesitated for a split second, and I barely kept a straight face. He shrugged and said, "I think there are enough peppers in there to kill any germs," before popping the chip in his mouth.

"Any luck verifying my alibi?"

He shook his head. "Sorry, not yet. The tollway authority was a bit busy today, and there's red tape at the phone company. I didn't get an answer at your apartment complex's office to get the name of your neighbor. His doorbell cam doesn't seem to be registered with a monitoring company, so I wasn't able to get any footage directly from them."

"Probably because he uses it to creep on me rather than for security." Emboldened by the tequila that was making its way through my system, I said, "You don't really think I killed him, do you? I mean, even if you thought I was that kind of person, I'm all wrong physically. It would have taken someone at least your height to have the right angle and leverage to have caused those injuries."

"I thought you were out of there as soon as you saw the body."

"I was, but I've got a really good memory. It's like I take mental snapshots, and that image is seared into my brain. I'm not sure I'll ever be able to forget it." I grabbed a cocktail napkin from the stack on the bar, took a pen from my purse, and sketched the scene. "What it looks like to me is that someone leaned over him, pushed him hard enough to send the chair rolling backwards and tilt it back, so he hit his head on the corner of that table. I'm about five-three, so I might have been able to send him straight back, but I wouldn't have been able to get the downward force to also tilt the chair. I'd guess that whoever did it set the chair back up. The way the body was lying, it looks like he and the chair fell, but the chair was upright and behind the desk when I got there."

He raised an eyebrow. "If you don't take the newspaper job—and if you aren't convicted of murder—I might be able to use you on the crime scene team. Well, aside from the stick figures."

"I'm a writer, not an artist."

"I'm surprised you didn't take a picture before you left."

I slapped myself on the forehead with the heel of my hand. "That didn't even occur to me, but then I wasn't planning to cover it as a story. I was more concerned with getting help. My editor would have killed me, if I still had a job."

"That just means you haven't lost your humanity."

"Speaking of losing humanity, it sounds like there are a lot of people in this town who had motive to kill Paul Ogden, and who might have been angry enough to give him a good shove, even if they weren't actually trying to kill him."

"Maybe. And I might have talked to them. But I can't discuss an ongoing investigation."

Margarita returned with a tray holding a margarita glass, which she put in front of Mosby, and a steaming plate of food, which she put in front of me. She also gave him a basket of chips and a small cup of salsa. "Do you know what you want to order?" she asked him.

He glanced at my plate. "I'll have what she's having. That looks good."

"It was the result of indecision on my part, but it does look good," I said. I picked up my fork, hesitated, since it seemed rude to eat in front of him, then decided that we might be sitting next to each other but we weren't technically eating together, so I cut off a bite of beef enchilada and blew on it until I thought it might be safe to put in my mouth.

While I ate, he said, "The newspaper board paid me a visit this afternoon. It seems you would have ended up with the editor's job whether or not he died, since he was leaving town."

"That's what they told me. I wonder why he was leaving town."

"I don't think he liked it here much. He wasn't really a small-

town kind of person. Everything he did after he got here was aimed at getting out. He kept looking for the big scoop that would get the attention of a larger paper.”

“Which is likely to give plenty of people reasons to dislike him. I made a list, if you want it.”

“I read the newspaper, so I imagine I have the same list.”

“Some of the people on it were seen downtown around the time of death.”

“I’ve interviewed witnesses.”

“And yet you keep investigating me.”

He took a long swallow of his drink before saying, “I’m trying to rule you out. It’ll make life easier for you if you start out as editor without any hint of a cloud over you.”

“Wait, all this was for my benefit?”

“What do you think people would have thought if you’d left town right after Ogden died?”

“What will people think when I had to stay here?”

“That you were smart enough not to hit the highway in this weather.”

Okay, that was likely true. Changing the subject, I gestured toward the photos. “What’s the deal with this town and circuses? The diner looks like a circus train, and there are circus photos here, too.”

I felt him relax next to me as the conversation moved away from murder. “It’s a fun little quirk in this town’s history. There was a traveling carnival sideshow that got stuck here during the Depression when the owners went bankrupt and skipped out. Most of the people ended up staying and became part of the town. I’d say about half the locals now are descended from sideshow performers.”

“Seriously? Why didn’t this come up in any of my research? It’s not on the tourism website or the Wikipedia article.”

“It’s not something we really promote.”

“Other than pictures in all the restaurants in town.”

“That’s just pictures of family members of locals. You see that sort of thing in most any small town. Ours merely happen to be more colorful.”

“You mean like tightrope walkers, trapeze artists, and lion tamers?”

He shook his head. “That’s a circus. This was a carnival sideshow. You’d buy your ticket and wander around to see the sights or stop in on any of the ongoing shows.”

“So, more like a bearded lady, Siamese twins, that sort of thing?”

“Yeah. And some acrobats, a strong man, fortune-teller, mind reader.”

“My great-great-grandmother was the fortune-teller,” Margarita said, returning with Mosby’s plate of food. “She had this whole ‘gypsy’ act. She may actually have been part Roma, by way of Spain, but mostly she was Mexican. She was dark and exotic enough to fit all the stereotypes. Her daughter was a kid when they got stuck here, and Grandma was born here.”

I turned to Mosby. “What about you? Do you have any carnival connection?”

He shrugged. “Like I said, just about everyone around here does.”

“What was your ancestor’s act?”

He paused for a split second before saying dryly, “The bearded lady. But you can’t tell because I shaved this morning.” This late in the day, he had the slightest hint of reddish stubble, which added to the soft-but-manly effect of the sweater.

“You must have a killer cheerleading squad if they’re descended from carnival acrobats.”

“National champions,” Margarita said, pointing to a poster taped to the bar mirror. “The football team isn’t bad, either.”

“Descended from the strong man,” I guessed.

“Some of them.”

“Now, this is interesting. But you don’t promote it?”

“The diner’s the only thing you can see that’s left,” Mosby said.

“There is a museum,” Margarita said. “But it’s not much to speak of.”

“Otherwise, it’s just the people, and nobody wants to be a sideshow freak these days,” Mosby continued.

“Good point,” I said, nodding.

But I couldn’t help but think that if the current generation had inherited any of their ancestors’ abilities or traits, there might be people around capable of pushing a chair hard enough to kill a man.

Chapter Nine

It probably wouldn't be too tactful to suggest that the killer was one of their sideshow performer descendant relatives, so I didn't share my theory with the others. They'd know better than I did if anyone in town was a modern-day strong man and were likely several steps ahead of me—if they were willing to consider that one of their own could be a killer.

A cold wind hit me in the back. Next to me, Lt. Mosby looked up at the mirror on the wall behind the bar. As soon as he saw the newcomer, he lowered his head and focused his entire being on his plate, as though he could shut out the rest of the world. Margarita grinned a greeting. I turned to see who'd brought on such different reactions.

He was a tall, thin man wearing a long wool coat and a trilby hat. He paused inside the doorway to remove his small, square glasses and wipe them on the end of his scarf. Putting them back on, he blinked and gave Margarita a friendly wave. "Thank God you're open," he said. "The cupboard was bare and I didn't want to get on the road to find anything else."

"And thank God I have customers," she said. "This was more than I was counting on. I wasn't sure it would be worth opening."

He took off his hat, brushed the sleet off it, and ran a hand through short fair hair. There was something familiar about him, but I couldn't quite place him. Perhaps noticing my stare, he smiled and said, "Hi, you must be our new newspaper editor."

"I'm the person who was supposed to interview for the job," I corrected. "Lexie Lincoln."

He stepped forward and gave me a firm handshake. "Jordan Randall."

That's why he looked familiar. He was a software tycoon, one of those guys who created an app that took off, making him millions, then sold the app for more millions to one of the big companies and started over. After doing that a few times, he was probably worth at least a billion, depending on how the stock market was doing on any given day. I didn't know what he was doing in this town. He and Margarita seemed to have some degree of familiarity, so he wasn't just passing through.

Meanwhile, Mosby didn't look up from his food or in any way acknowledge Jordan. "Hey, Wes," Jordan said, taking the seat to my other side.

Mosby grunted something that might have been a greeting but more likely translated to "Go to hell." Now that I saw what he was like when he didn't like someone, I understood why people kept insisting that he really didn't suspect me of murder. If he'd disliked me, it would have been a lot more obvious.

"I don't suppose you're feeling friendly tonight," Jordan said to Margarita after a glance at my glass.

"I made a pitcher," she said before going to the kitchen and returning with it and a basket of chips. She took a glass from under the bar and poured for him. "I have a feeling we could all use it, and it's going to be just us friends tonight. Anyone need a refill?"

I raised my hand. I was already feeling my first drink, but I didn't have far to walk, and after the day I'd had, I needed all the help relaxing I could get. Lt. Mosby had barely touched his drink after his first few sips, and he shook his head. "There's a chance I'll have to go back to work on a night like this." Just then, his phone rang. He glanced at the screen and muttered, "Speak of the devil." Into the phone he said, "Yeah? Okay. On my way." After ending the call, he said, "They're calling in all hands." He gave his half-

eaten meal a wistful look.

"I'll box it up for you," Margarita said, grabbing a container from under the bar. She slid the food into it and handed it to Wes with a packet of plastic cutlery. "You can pay me later. I know where to find you."

"Thanks." He buttoned up his coat, put on his hat, and braced himself before opening the door.

As soon as he was gone, Jordan said, "Put his dinner on my tab."

"He's gonna hate that," she said.

He shrugged. "He can deal with it." I knew there had to be a story there, and my curiosity must have shown on my face because he said, "We go way back. We were best buds growing up, but some bad blood has muddied the waters over the years, to mix a metaphor. I'm trying to make amends, but Wes can hold a grudge like nobody I've ever met. But enough about old scores. You picked a bad day to come to town."

"I'm getting that feeling. Between murder and the weather, I've got the makings of an epic diary entry," I said.

His eyebrows rose above the thick frames of his glasses. "Murder?"

"Don't tell me you didn't notice all the commotion downtown," Margarita said.

"I was out at the building site most of the day, until the front hit and it started looking bad." To me, he added, "I'm building a new home on the edge of town."

"I think I saw that on my way here," I said. "I thought it was going to be some kind of resort."

He grinned. "It is, but it's my personal resort. Well, my family's. My parents and sister. Everyone will have their own apartment within the house, and then there are gathering spaces for the whole family, with room to entertain. And there's an indoor pool for my sister's therapy."

"How's she doing?" Margarita asked.

“She’s hanging in there. Winters are rough on her. The heated indoor pool will help, if it ever gets finished.”

It said a lot about how my day had gone that I barely noticed this part of the conversation because I was sidetracked by the thought that if he’d spent most of the day at the building site on the edge of town and if he’d been genuinely surprised about the murder, he was one person I could strike off the suspect list. The work crew could give him a solid alibi. Then again, he was wealthy enough to hire someone to do his dirty work for him. And he might have the technical know-how to wipe my car’s GPS, or would know someone who did. A sociopath could easily feign innocence. Maybe my suspect list wasn’t growing shorter.

Margarita headed to the kitchen with the lieutenant’s plate, and Jordan dug in to his basket of tortilla chips. I’d nearly cleaned my plate, and I used a chip to scrape up the last bits of cheese and sauce. The town might be weird, but the food here was amazing. I’d have to start a serious exercise routine to live here.

Yet another cold blast hit, and a man entered the restaurant. He, too, looked familiar, and I quickly realized he was the candidate for Congress who was supposed to have met with Paul Ogden to get an endorsement. He didn’t have to stretch too hard for the Clark Kent imagery in his campaign. He was tall, with the broad shoulders and narrow hips of a swimmer or weightlifter. His dark hair was neatly parted down the side, and he even had the requisite square jaw and dimpled chin. I wondered if he needed the glasses to see or if they were just to complete the look. I definitely got the impression that if you ripped his shirt open, you’d see a big S underneath.

“Oh good, you’re open,” he said to Margarita, who’d just returned from the kitchen. That seemed to be a common sentiment tonight.

“Sit anywhere,” she said.

Before taking a seat, he approached me with his hand out. “Hi, I’m Clark Keaton.” The “and I’d appreciate your vote” was implied

in his tone.

“Lexie Lincoln,” I said, shaking his hand. “Just visiting from Dallas.” His grip was pleasantly firm, strong enough to mean business, but not crushing.

“The new newspaper editor! I need to make an appointment with you. I’d like to discuss an endorsement.”

“I haven’t been officially offered the job,” I said. “The murder disrupted the interview.”

“Well, when you do, I’d love to sit down together and talk about what I hope to do for this district in Congress.” He turned to Jordan and shook his hand. “Jordan. Good to see you. I wonder if you’d be interested in making a campaign contribution. We could really make a difference for Stirling Mills.”

“I contribute in other ways,” Jordan said, his tone perfectly neutral.

“Yes, and we’re certainly grateful for the electric-car charging stations and the Internet access. But there’s so much more to be done for this town and the area—and for the nation. I’d like to at least set up a meeting to talk about it. But I agree, no business talk tonight.”

I was a little glad that Margarita hadn’t yet completely cleared the lieutenant’s place next to me so that Keaton had to sit on Jordan’s other side. Keaton seemed like a nice enough guy, but he was really intense, and I’d need a lot more margaritas to deal with that after the day I’d had.

“You all done with that?” Margarita asked me after bringing Keaton some iced tea and taking Jordan’s order.

“There might be a molecule of cheese left on the plate,” I said. “It was wonderful, and it even opened my sinuses a bit.”

“All my *abuela*’s recipes—my father’s mother. Not the side of the family with the classical guitarist and the fortune-teller. They can’t cook. Are you interested in dessert?”

“What do you have?”

“There’s some flan, or we could make up some churros pretty

quickly. That would go well with some Mexican hot chocolate.”

“Ooh, that.”

She took my plate back to the kitchen. “So, Lexie, are you in town long?” Jordan asked.

“That all depends.”

“Oh, right, the weather.”

“And my car. Something happened to the electrical system.” I watched his face carefully as I said it, but if he’d had anything to do with sabotaging my car, he was either a sociopath or a brilliant actor because there wasn’t the tiniest trace of guilt. Then again, our killer was likely on the sociopathic end of the spectrum if he could injure someone that badly and then just walk away.

“Ouch. Well, if the weather clears before your car gets fixed and you need to get home, I could lend you a car. I have plenty.” He said it so casually, like he was talking about lending a book. I guess to a billionaire a car would be about as much a percentage of his net worth as a book was to mine. Or less.

“Thanks, that’s really kind of you, but Lieutenant Mosby is taking care of it.”

His friendly smile faded slightly. “Oh. Well, I’m sure Wes has everything under control.” There was a bitter note to his voice.

“Hush, you,” Margarita scolded as she placed a mug of cocoa topped with a mound of whipped cream dusted with cinnamon and a plate of cinnamon-sugar sprinkled churros with a small dish of chocolate sauce in front of me. “You two aren’t competing for top of the class anymore.” She went on to take Keaton’s order and brought out Jordan’s food.

I wolfed down the churros, then sat feeling pleasantly full with my hands wrapped around the cocoa mug. “This has been wonderful,” I told Margarita. “I’m not saying it was worth everything that happened today, but I’m glad I found your place. I don’t suppose you do breakfast.”

“Sorry, no. But I live over the restaurant, so if you can’t make it anywhere else, I can whip up some breakfast tacos. Better yet,

here's my number. Give me a call if you need something." She scribbled a number on a napkin and handed it to me. "Do you have everything you need for the night? Grandma and her friends made sure the apartment was set up, so the sheets are clean, and there should be towels and toilet paper."

"I had an overnight bag with me, so I should be set. The apartment's perfect, aside from reeking of smoke."

Her eyes widened momentarily, then she grinned quickly before schooling her face. "Huh, I've never noticed that, but I haven't spent much time there. Miss Lily didn't smoke, but Miss Jean was from an earlier era when that was a lot more common. The smell may be left over from her." Her lips twitched ever so slightly, like she was enjoying an inside joke. She pointed to one of the photos on the wall behind her over the mirror. "There she is, with some of the sideshow people."

I squinted to study the picture of a young woman who could have easily been cast as the tough-talking dame in a screwball comedy, with dark hair falling in sculpted waves from a side part and a cigarette in a long holder, standing with an exotic-looking woman who must have been Margarita's ancestor and a brawny man in a striped singlet.

"She must be the one who started the newspaper foundation," I said.

"She never had children, and she inherited a fortune. She said the newspaper was her child, so she left her money to it."

"Must be nice not to have to worry about investors making a profit."

"Yes, that is nice for the editor. Something to consider."

"If I'm not arrested for murder."

"Arrested for murder?" Jordan asked. "Really?"

"I found the body, and they're having trouble checking my alibi," I explained. "I didn't do it," I hurried to add. "But your Lieutenant Mosby thinks I have a motive."

He snorted. "He'd suspect his own grandmother if he didn't

have hard evidence clearing her. Don't worry, if he really thought you did it, you'd be in a cell right now."

I finished my cocoa with a sigh. "Anything else?" Margarita asked.

"No, I'm afraid not. I couldn't eat another crumb."

"I'll take the check," Jordan said. "Add it to my tab."

"You don't have to do that," I said.

"I insist. You had a rough introduction to this town, and I'd like to make up for it." I wondered if he was feeling guilty. Or was he trying to get in the good graces of the new newspaper editor? Or maybe he was simply being nice. That did still happen occasionally.

"Well, if you insist. Thanks."

Margarita brought me my phone, now fully charged, and I bundled up before heading out into the night. For a moment, I considered going to the movie, but when I left the restaurant, I saw that the lights on the marquee were out. It was probably for the best. There was no telling how bad the weather would be two hours later. As it was, visibility was down to just a few feet, and footing was treacherous, like walking on marbles. A movie on TV, if I could find a good one, would probably be a better idea.

I was just about to cross the street when a voice behind me called out, "Wait a second!" I turned to see Keaton coming out of the restaurant door. "I can give you a ride. I've got a four-by-four that handles pretty well in this kind of weather."

"Thanks. That's really kind of you, but I just have to cross the street." I pointed toward the newspaper office.

"Oh, you're staying in the editor's apartment? That's good. I'll walk you over there."

"There's no need. I'm fine."

"I make a pretty good windbreak," he said with a grin. I had to admit he was right about that, since I could probably hide completely behind him. "And there is a murderer in town, so I hate for you to be walking alone at night."

“You know I can’t vote for you, right?” I said. “Even if I do take the job, I won’t be able to register in time to vote in the primary in this district.” Not to mention it was the wrong party for me.

He took a few steps closer, standing so that he blocked the wind and driving sleet. “No strings. I’m not looking for votes. I’m just trying to be a decent human being. Even a politician can occasionally do a good deed with no ulterior motive.”

“Okay, you’re hired as a windbreak,” I said. It actually did feel better with him standing between me and the North Pole. We made our way carefully across the street. It was a little better once we were in the back of the newspaper building, where we were shielded by the surrounding buildings. “I’ll be fine from here, thanks,” I told him. “There’s not even a lot of sleet building up back here. I bet your dinner’s ready by now.”

He hesitated, but he didn’t argue. “Have a good evening,” he said. “Stay warm.”

I hurried up the stairs to the apartment and, once inside, made sure I locked the door, including the interior deadbolt. I changed into my sweatpants, put on the kettle to make a cup of herbal tea, and headed to the sofa, where I was surprised to find that article copy about the valedictorian who’d died on graduation night. Weird. I could have sworn I put that back in the box. I moved it to the coffee table and settled on the sofa. Unfortunately, it seemed what I had was an antenna, since I only got the broadcast stations, and there was nothing on. I turned the TV off. Fortunately, the Wi-Fi was good, so if I did take the job, I’d be able to use streaming services.

Without a phone charger, that wasn’t an option at the moment. I wanted to keep my power for communicating. But it probably wouldn’t hurt to do a little more research. I pulled up the paper’s site again and searched for Jordan’s name. Surely the town’s favorite son moving back after making billions would have merited a mention or two. And it did. There was a story about him buying land outside town to build his new mansion, then a story about the

city annexing that land and him putting up a futile fight. That explained the city limits in the middle of nowhere. I figured the town wanted a piece of the property taxes from that mansion. The paper covered his donation of public wireless Internet service to the downtown area, in a move he hoped would spur business development and aid tourism efforts, as well as his donation of the electric-vehicle charging stations, which was to encourage people driving across Texas to come downtown to charge their cars and possibly shop and eat while they were at it. That article came with a photo of him charging his Tesla. I wondered how philanthropic he really was, since he seemed to benefit the most. Was he getting a tax write-off for donating these things to the town?

Sure enough, the next article I found was an editorial posing that very same question and asking who really stood to benefit. It turned out that Jordan Randall had purchased most of the buildings in the downtown area that had been empty when he moved back to town. Now he was renting out office and apartment space that was more valuable thanks to the amenities he'd donated. The editorial conceded that he was offering rent breaks to some of his tenants. That was how artists like Ruthie had been enticed. But, overall, the editorial took the tone that he was merely doing things for his own good rather than for that of the town.

Was a negative editorial from several months earlier a motive for murder? He hadn't struck me as the type to lose his cool like that. I skimmed through the rest of the articles, and the oldest one turned out to have nothing to do with Jordan Randall, software billionaire. It must have been from while he was in college, and it was actually about his sister, who'd been seriously injured in a car accident while he was driving. That must have been what he and Margarita had been talking about and why she needed an indoor swimming pool for therapy.

That article was from well before Paul Ogden's time, but as critical as he was of Jordan, I wondered if he'd done any digging that might have unearthed something that was worth killing over. I

went back to the closet and dug into the “Misc.” box again. The only thing I found that might have been relevant was a clipping of a paragraph from a magazine. Jordan’s name wasn’t mentioned in the paragraph, but the phrase “moved back to his Texas hometown to care for his elderly parents and handicapped sister” suggested that he was the subject. The paragraph went on to mention his funding of improvements in town, including making the downtown area more accessible. Scrawled in the margin was the word “guilt?”

Jordan had been driving when his sister was injured. Had Ogden uncovered evidence that there was more to it, like alcohol? That would certainly damage his reputation in town and in the worldwide business community, and it had taken someone with technical know-how to ruin my alibi. Then again, he’d already made his billion. He didn’t need to make more money, didn’t really need a reputation.

I suddenly found myself in total darkness. I crawled out of the closet and felt my way to the window, where I saw that all of downtown was dark. So, a power outage rather than a bad bulb. Either the wind had blown down a power line or an ice-covered tree had fallen. There wasn’t much I could do with no power, so I figured I might as well go to bed. I gave my teeth a cursory brushing by feel, removed my contact lenses, and washed my face before getting under the covers. I hoped I could stay warm enough. Was the heat in this building gas or electric?

It didn’t take me long to fall asleep, but it didn’t seem like long before I woke again, startled awake as though by an alarm. I checked my phone, and it was just past eleven. Holding my breath, I listened intently and heard a noise, like something had been knocked over. The bedroom was right above the newsroom, and the sound had come from downstairs. Someone was in the newspaper office.

Chapter Ten

I wasted no time in calling 911. The last thing I needed was the police suspecting I'd found a way to go downstairs and dig around in the crime scene. The dispatcher assured me that someone would be there right away. That morning the police had arrived within seconds, but the roads were terrible now, so I wasn't sure how quickly they could get to me. I felt so vulnerable, alone in the building with someone who probably was a killer. I couldn't imagine ordinary looters would bother breaking into a newspaper office on a night like this.

I slipped out of bed and dropped to the ground, pressing my ear against the wooden floor. I heard muffled sounds from below, but not enough to tell me what the intruder was doing. Probably opening drawers. I doubted the cops had left anything interesting in there, and the desk had been pretty clean, but if you're worried that you left a smoking gun behind, I guess you wouldn't want to take any chances.

What if he decided to check upstairs? The stuff that had been on the editor's desk was in a box in the closet. How many people knew I was staying in the apartment—and would my presence serve as a deterrent, or would that make him even more likely to come upstairs to search and maybe get rid of someone who might have learned something incriminating?

I was just wondering if there was anything in the apartment that I could use as a weapon when I heard a noise outside. I crept

to the window and squinted as I looked out to see a police SUV pull up in front of the office. The awning over the front door blocked my view, so I couldn't see what happened next. I heard a shout, and then the SUV started again and headed down the street, lights flashing and siren blaring. The siren sounded like it might be rounding the corner. I hurried to the living room to the windows that overlooked the rear of the building.

I could see the flashing red and blue lights but nothing else. I waited anxiously, hopping from one foot to the other, wondering what was happening. A few minutes later, a light appeared on the balcony. It startled me, but then I saw Lt. Mosby, still in civilian clothes, standing there. While he was still raising a hand to knock, I unlocked the door and gestured for him to come inside.

"Did you catch him?" I asked.

"No. Looks like he got out through the back before I could make it around the building."

"But there was someone there?"

"Definitely. I saw the flashlight through the window when I pulled up. He must have thought he could get in without the alarm going off during the power outage. Looks like he got in through the door on the loading dock, but there was no sign of a break-in."

"Did you find the editor's keys? I mean, this morning, when you were working on the crime scene."

He froze, the deer-in-the-headlights look even more striking when lit only by a flashlight. "No, I don't think we found any keys, either in the office or on him." He took a two-way radio handset out of his coat pocket and said, "Glenn, have we got anyone who can check on Paul Ogden's place?"

There was a crackle of static, then an answering voice said, "Bobby's not too far from there. I'll get him to swing by."

"Roger. Thanks. Have him make sure no one's in there and seal it like a crime scene." To me, he added, "Good thought."

"And that means the killer has a key to this place, right?" I said with a shiver.

“You’ve got interior deadbolts. Use them. I’ll try to get someone out tomorrow to change the locks.” I started to protest that I hoped I wouldn’t be here that long, but he raised a hand to silence me. “I don’t think you’ll be going anywhere for a couple of days. The roads are a mess. We’ve been rescuing stranded motorists all night. I’ve got chains on my tires, but I still wouldn’t try to hit the highway. It may get above freezing briefly tomorrow, but that would only make matters worse because it won’t be enough to clear the roads, but it will be enough to make things really slick when it refreezes.”

“Oh, joy,” I said, heaving a sigh. “I guess when you don’t want a suspect to leave town, you don’t mess around.”

“You’re blaming me for the weather?”

“I think the evidence that you caused this weather is about as strong as the evidence you have for me killing Paul Ogden—or stronger. After all, I know you were actually here when the weather changed, and you have a powerful motive.”

He yawned. “Yeah, and I’m also having to work all night.”

I felt bad for him, just a tiny bit. “It’s a gas stove, so I may be able to put a kettle on. Would you like some hot tea before you head out again?”

Even by flashlight and without my glasses, I could see him wrestling with the dilemma. Finally, he said, “Sure, yeah, thanks. I could use a bit of a pick-me-up, and I should probably stick around until I’m sure whoever got in is no longer around.”

He held the flashlight so I could see what I was doing. It was an older stove, so I thought I might be able to light it with a match. We’d had one like it in the base housing at one of the places where we’d lived when I was a kid. I’d noticed some matches in one of the cabinets, probably for this very circumstance. The burner lit on my first try, making me feel extremely competent. I put the kettle on to boil and got out some mugs.

“While you’ve got the matches out, there should be some candles around here,” the lieutenant said. He found some, a little

dusty, faded, and warped, but they still lit, shedding more light on the situation.

I got my emergency supply of tea out of my bag. “Any preference?” I asked. “I’ve got regular red label, breakfast brew, bedtime brew, cinnamon spice, and some orange spice herbal tea.”

“I need the caffeine tonight, but I don’t know anything about tea.”

I chose the red label for him, bedtime brew for me. “I hope you don’t suspect me of breaking in down there,” I said while I waited for the water to boil.

“Nope. I saw the flashlight downstairs at the same time as I saw you in the window upstairs. At least, I assume it was you, but I don’t think you could have gotten away out the back and made it up here without me seeing you going up the stairs.”

“And don’t you think that clears me of the murder? The killer must have taken the keys and used them to get into the office. You’ve already said you don’t think I was the one downstairs.”

“Maybe you have an accomplice.”

“And I called the cops on my accomplice?”

“Conveniently creating a situation in which I saw you upstairs while seeing the flashlight downstairs, seemingly clearing you.”

“Oh, I didn’t think of that. You are one shifty dude, Lieutenant Mosby. And you must think I’m a criminal mastermind.”

“Wes,” he corrected. “You might as well call me Wes.”

The kettle whistled and I turned to pour water into the mugs. “Are you on a first-name basis with all your murder suspects?” I asked.

“Just the ones I have midnight tea with by candlelight. And when you spend as much time around criminals as I do, you learn to think like them. Granted, most of the people I deal with are really dumb. But every so often, I run into someone who thinks at odd angles. It’s a mental exercise to try to anticipate their moves to elude me. Believe it or not, I have had a case in which someone I suspected of a series of break-ins called the cops on his accomplice

while he was elsewhere, just to throw us off the trail. What he didn't count on was that we'd catch his buddy, and his buddy would flip on him. Seems he was angry about being set up like that. We ended up finding a whole stash of stolen goods in the other guy's house."

"So, basically, he was too smart for his own good."

"Yeah. I wonder what the person tonight was looking for in the office. We searched it pretty well and didn't find anything other than the specifics of the job offer for you. Either Ogden had cleaned his desk pretty well, or the killer took everything but your job offer this morning but was still afraid he missed something."

"I might be able to help you with that," I said. "There's a box in the closet here that looks like what you'd get if you shoved everything off the top of your typical messy desk into a box to deal with later. I'm afraid I've already gone through it, since I didn't know what it was at first. There was also a box of letters to the editor."

"Yeah, that could be relevant."

I took the tea bags out of the mugs. "Do you take it with milk or sugar?" I asked him.

"Sugar, I guess. That's the way I drink iced tea."

There were packets in the cabinet, and I added one to his cup before handing it over. I grabbed the bin of animal crackers, and we took our tea to the bistro table, where he'd set out the candles. After we'd sipped silently for a while, he said, "Did you find anything interesting in that box?"

Although I'd been keen on the idea of Jordan Randall as a suspect when I'd researched him, now I hesitated to bring him up. I didn't want to throw him under the bus just to deflect suspicion from myself. Then again, Wes was likely to find that clipping, and I might save him some time by mentioning it. "There was a piece of a clipping that I think was about Jordan Randall, mentioning him coming home to take care of his parents and sister, with the word 'guilt' with a question mark written in the margin. It looks like

there had been some pretty negative articles and editorials about him, too.”

“That was one thing I liked about Paul Ogden,” Wes said with a nod. “He was one of the few people in town who wasn’t snowed by our local boy made good.”

“Did he mean that Jordan felt guilty about his sister’s accident?”

“He was driving. And he was always a terrible driver. But my dad worked that wreck, and he said Jordan wasn’t at fault. Someone else ran a red light.” He scowled as he took a sip of tea. “At least, that’s what they said. It was someone from out of town who hit them. Everyone rallied around our locals. Lisa was paralyzed. But I don’t know if I can see Jordan killing anyone to hush up whatever did happen if Ogden managed to learn something.”

“And you can’t stand the guy. But you can see me killing?”

“I don’t know you.” But he smiled ever so slightly as he said it.

“He’s a technology whiz, so he might know how to do something like wipe a car’s GPS.”

“You’re trying to throw suspicion at someone else to clear your own name, aren’t you?”

I shrugged. “If he’s innocent, you’ll know. That’s what people keep telling me about you. But you need all the facts to figure it out, and I’m merely giving you some facts.”

During this conversation, the smell of smoke became more and more overpowering, and I didn’t think it was the candles. If I hadn’t been smelling it all along, and if it wasn’t so obviously cigarette smoke, I’d have worried that the building was on fire. I couldn’t help but cough.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“It’s just the smoke smell getting to me.”

“I don’t smell anything.”

“Maybe I’m super sensitive. Margarita said the former editor used to smoke, so it must have permeated the place.”

“I thought you were stuffed up from allergies and couldn’t smell anything.”

“The rain seems to have cleared the air, and then the Mexican food opened my sinuses. And the smoke smell is really strong. I can’t believe you don’t smell it.”

He had a faint smile that suggested he found this amusing. If there had been enough light to see his eyes, I was sure I’d have seen laughter in them. “Uh huh. Did you find anything else in there?”

“There was a copy of an article about the death of the valedictorian about twenty years ago. I thought that was a strange thing for him to have, unless something new had come up in the case.”

“Not that I’m aware of.” He was quiet for a moment before he said, his voice distant, “That was back when I was a freshman. It was really tragic, the valedictorian dying on graduation night. It would have been tragic whenever she died, but that made it ironic as well as tragic. I didn’t know Carolyn Stevens well. She was missing for a few days, and then they found her dead in her car halfway in the river. They think she ran off the road on her way home from a graduation party, since that was the last anyone saw of her. I’m surprised she even went to the party. She wasn’t really the party type, but I guess she wanted to put in an appearance. Nobody saw her drinking, and she didn’t stay long, but then she didn’t make it home. I remember the memorial service they had for her, mostly because it made me angry.”

“Angry? Why?”

“All the people who spoke acted like they’d miss her, like she really mattered to them, but she didn’t. Most of them hadn’t spoken to her when she was alive, unless it was to mock her. They assumed that because she was smart she wouldn’t be any fun and didn’t give her a chance. I think she’d have been okay when she got out of here and went off to college, but she didn’t get that opportunity.” There was a surprising depth of emotion in that little

speech, and I wondered if he was doing a bit of projecting there. He seemed awfully sure of what everyone else had been thinking.

“Was she killed or was it an accident?”

“It was treated as an accident. It was hard to tell by the time they found her. I don’t know a lot of the details because it was way before my time as a cop. My dad worked the case, so I mostly know what he talked about at home. I wonder why Ogden had a copy of that article.”

“Has there been another wreck in that area? Is it an unsafe spot?”

“It’s a curve, and the slope to the river is pretty steep, but it’s not the worst spot on the river road.” He drained his mug and set it on the table. “I’ll look into it, see if there’s anything that might have brought it up again. Well, it’s been nice thawing in here, but I’d probably better get back out there.” He stood. “Thanks for the tea. I needed that. I’ll have to try it hot more often. That’s pretty good.”

“Far better than coffee,” I said, rising to walk him to the door.

“Let’s not go too far.” He paused with his hand on the doorknob. “I’ll come back by for those boxes sometime in the morning.”

“If you’re sure you trust them in the hands of a suspect.”

“The evidence is already contaminated, since you went through it. If you’re trying to hide anything, it’s already gone. But I would appreciate it if you’d stay out of them for now.”

“Don’t worry, I’m going right back to bed.”

When he was gone, I made sure all the doors were locked and chained from the inside before blowing out all but one of the candles. I used that candle to light my way back to the bedroom. Sleep wasn’t going to come easily, even as tired as I was, since I couldn’t help but startle at every noise. The old building might as well have been alive. There were creaks and rattles, even a moan or two. It was a good thing I didn’t believe in ghosts or I’d have been sure the place was haunted.

I must have managed to drift off because I woke with a start when I smelled smoke again. Surely there were smoke detectors that would go off if the building really was on fire. I rolled onto my back, sat up, and found myself looking right at a woman who sat at the foot of my bed, smoking a cigarette in a holder. “What does it take to get your attention?” she said.

Chapter Eleven

I probably should have screamed, but I couldn't make any sound come out. I couldn't even breathe. Someone had managed to get into the locked apartment in the middle of the night—a locked apartment over the site of a recent murder, and the murderer likely had a key.

“Oh, relax, honey,” the woman said. “I’m not here to hurt you. I don’t think I *can* hurt anyone. I’ve never managed it before, and believe me, Paul Ogden made me want to try.”

“So, you’re the one who killed him,” I managed to say, my voice squeaking with fright. Did I have anything at hand I could use to defend myself? The lamp looked pretty sturdy, but I wasn’t sure I could get to it in time.

“Me? Like I told you, I can’t hurt anyone, since I’m not exactly here, strictly speaking. What you’re seeing is an apparition projected into this plane.”

I was still too sleep-fogged to process that. “Huh?” I said. “Can you translate that from New Age to English?”

“I’m a ghost. A specter. A spirit of one who has gone on.” Her voice took on an eerie, moaning quality as she said that last sentence.

Now that she mentioned it, she did seem to be rather translucent, and she had a soft glow about her. In fact, I shouldn’t have been able to see a person so clearly in the dark. She was like an outline of a person, lit from within. “A ghost, of course,” I said.

This had to be a dream, but I thought I should roll with it. Maybe my subconscious was trying to tell me something. “A ghost of whom?”

“Jean Jacobs, editor emeritus of the Stirling Mills *Gazette*.”

“You’re the one who established the endowment.”

“Yep, I’ve been running this paper since nineteen twenty-five, and I should warn you that I don’t intend to stop anytime soon.”

Remembering my manners, I said, “I’m Lexie Lincoln.”

“I know who you are. Who do you think picked you out? There are certain unique requirements to edit this paper, namely that you can see and hear me well enough to take direction. When you wrote that article about the haunted restaurant, it was clear you were actually able to see the resident spirits. They spoke highly of you.”

In all my years reporting, that article was the one thing I’d written that had really taken off. Every year at Halloween it spread around the Internet again. I hadn’t actually seen a ghost at that restaurant—at least, not that I’d been aware of. But, I reminded myself, this was a dream, so I couldn’t expect it to make too much sense. “Is that why I got a job offer within minutes of being laid off?”

“That newsroom is pretty haunted, and the spirits spread the word of the layoff.”

“Oh, yes, of course,” I said with a laugh. “I got a job because ghosts like me.” I put on a spooky, child-like voice. “I see dead people.”

“Yep. Not everyone can,” she said, perfectly seriously. She didn’t seem to get the reference. I guessed they didn’t get movies in the afterlife, and that one had been after her time. “To do this job, you need to be a good journalist and you need to be able to communicate with the spirit plane. After Lily passed on, we didn’t have anyone local who was up to it. Paul Ogden seemed to qualify, but it turns out that being able to hear us and being willing to listen are two totally different things. He even got his own place so

he wouldn't have to live here and deal with me. It was all for the best that he hated it and wanted out."

I could hardly blame him. I didn't like the idea of a chain-smoking ghostly roommate/boss, myself. "I've been smelling smoke. Was that you hanging around me all this time?"

"It took you long enough to notice. I couldn't get your attention, and goodness knows I tried. Making that first connection can be tricky. Getting you while you were half asleep was my last stab. A full manifestation still isn't easy, but now that we've chatted and you're open to it, it shouldn't take me quite so much energy to make you see me. Now for what I've been trying to tell you: Did you even look at that article? I did everything but wave it in your face. Do you know how much effort it takes me to affect the physical realm?"

I looked down and saw that the photocopied article now lay on top of the bedspread. I suspected it had invaded my dream because I'd discussed it with Wes. "Yeah, I saw it. I even read it. But that happened ages ago. How is it relevant now?"

"Because that girl's spirit has suddenly become very agitated."

"Agitated?"

"Something's upsetting her, maybe to do with someone linked to her. Like maybe her family—or her killer."

I perked up. "Do you know who killed her?"

"I'm dead, not omniscient. It's not one big social hour in the spirit plane. We don't have long conversations. Most of them don't even really talk. They've lost the power of words. I'm different because I made a conscious effort to stick around. This is my town, and I have no intention of going anywhere. But I do sometimes pick up on things, and that poor girl is now quite unsettled. I finally managed to force Ogden to listen to me, and he started investigating."

"And now he's dead."

"Yep. Convenient for someone, I'm sure."

"You aren't getting any vibes from him, are you?"

“He’s nowhere to be found in the afterlife. Not everyone sticks around in this plane. He hated it here in life. He sure wasn’t going to stick around in death.”

“And you didn’t see his murder?”

“Sorry, no. I haven’t been hanging around the office much. Why bother if he wasn’t going to listen to me? The only thing I managed to get through to him about was you, and that was because you were his ticket out of here. So I wasn’t there when he got killed. But I’ll bet if you track down the killer of Carolyn Stevens, you’ll find out who murdered Paul Ogden. That’s what my gut’s telling me. Ogden wasn’t popular, but the only thing he’s done lately that was any different from his usual work was ask questions about Carolyn.”

She was growing fainter and blurrier around the edges, like she was fading from this plane. “Wait, don’t, I still have questions!” I called out, but she was soon gone entirely and the room plunged into blackness. I lay back on the pillows, my mind reeling. The obvious explanation was that this was all a dream. I’d seen the photo of Jean Jacobs in the restaurant and my mind had conjured up her spirit, probably as a way of telling me something my subconscious had figured out from my research. The article had clearly been significant, since it was in the box of things cleared from Ogden’s desk. It may have been old, but the past could affect the present, especially when the past was dragged into the present and someone preferred to keep it buried.

The dream, if that’s what it was, eventually morphed into something else, so I was no longer lying in bed in the apartment over the newsroom, thinking about a ghostly visitor giving me tips about a case. Instead, I was eating Mexican food with Wes Mosby, and then we were running together—not fleeing anything, just running together across a sunny meadow, like something out of a perfume commercial, or possibly one of those TV movies. I didn’t know where that had come from. It wasn’t one of my typical romantic fantasies. He did look good, though, wearing that

fisherman's sweater, with the sunlight glinting red highlights in his hair.

From there, the dream morphed again and again, as dreams tend to do, and eventually I woke to a dim gray light in the room—this time coming through the windows rather than from a spirit sitting on the end of the bed. That thought reminded me of the weird dream. Apparently, my subconscious wanted me to investigate the valedictorian's death. I wondered if there really might be a link or if I'd just shoved two unrelated things together in my mind. Wes had sounded like he wasn't entirely convinced there was no foul play. Maybe Ogden really had uncovered something.

And then there was that other dream. My face grew warm as I remembered the perfume commercial with Wes, and I pulled the blankets over my head in embarrassment. My dating life had been minimal for a long time, so there was little wonder that I'd imprinted on the first eligible man I'd met in a while. And then I'd inserted him into a romantic montage straight out of a movie. The dream had been the kind of scene that usually comes before an evil ex shows up to ruin everything with a misunderstanding that will be resolved five minutes later. I decided that tea in the middle of the night might not have been the best idea ever, even if it hadn't been caffeinated. Rubbing at my gritty eyes, I yawned as I rolled over and sat up.

I reached over to try the bedside lamp, but either the bulb was bad or the power was still out. I slid out of bed and went to the window. It wasn't quite what I'd consider a winter wonderland, but there was a certain stark beauty in the ice-covered town. I didn't see any lights in any of the windows along Main Street, so it looked like the whole town was still in the dark. No one was out and about. I might as well have been the only person left in the world. I shuddered at the feeling.

What I needed was a nice cup of tea and some breakfast. The breakfast might be hard to come by, since there was no power and

it looked like everything was closed, but my emergency kit contained some packets of instant oatmeal. That would do quite nicely, I decided. I turned to head to the kitchen, and that was when I noticed the piece of paper lying on top of the covers next to where I'd been lying.

That copy of the article about Carolyn Stevens, which I was sure I'd left on the coffee table the night before, had somehow come to me during the night.

Chapter Twelve

I tried to think of a logical explanation for the article moving. Had I gotten up during the night and picked it up? I wasn't prone to sleepwalking, as far as I knew, but I had been under a lot of stress. Maybe I'd taken it with me to put it back in the box after Wes left. I didn't remember doing so, but it was the kind of thing I might do automatically. I liked being neat and organized, so it was a habit to take things with me to put back where they belonged when I went from one room to the next.

Yes, that was it, I decided. My neat freak self had operated on autopilot. That same draft that had blown it into the living room had blown it onto the bed. Old buildings like these were full of drafts.

I looked at the article again. I hadn't thought it meant anything, but since my subconscious clearly did, I was curious. Unfortunately, the power outage had taken out the Wi-Fi, and the cellular signal was spotty, so I couldn't do any digging on my phone. It would have been lovely if I could have gone down to the newspaper office to look in the archives, but after the intruder the night before, it was now a double crime scene.

That reminded me that Wes was coming to get the boxes this morning. I decided to get dressed before I started breakfast. True, he'd seen me in the sweat suit I'd used as pajamas the night before, but that had been in darkness in the middle of the night. I didn't want to look like a slob in broad daylight. I put in my contacts and

changed into jeans and a clean shirt. My hair was a lost cause, so I twisted it up in a messy bun.

I never knew when I'd get a proper meal when I was out of town on assignment, so my travel bag was well-stocked, not just with tea but also with packets of soup, cocoa and cider mixes, and instant oatmeal. Between cocoa, cider, and oatmeal, I'd have a more or less complete breakfast. I got the stove lit and washed mugs while the water boiled, then sat down for my breakfast. I reread the article as I ate.

I'd just finished eating when Wes called to say he was on his way over. I hurried to put the article back in the box, then brushed my teeth and put on some lipstick. Not that I was primping for him. There was simply a certain uncomfortable intimacy to seeing someone when they were right out of bed, so I wanted to look like I was ready to be out in public. I was straightening the bedspread when I heard the knock on the door.

Seeing him when I opened the door reminded me of that strange dream of running across a field with him. I felt my face grow warm. Dreaming about him didn't mean anything, I reminded myself. Given the role he'd played in my life during the day and the fact that I'd seen him in the middle of the night, it was perfectly natural that he'd be on my mind and, therefore, appearing in my dreams. I wasn't sure what the running across a field in a perfume commercial or romantic movie was all about, but maybe I was hoping for better weather. "Did you get any sleep?" I asked him. The circles under his eyes and the reddish stubble on his jaw made that a dumb question.

He yawned. "I think I'm about to. A nap, at the very least, as soon as I get those boxes."

"They're back here," I said, leading him to the bedroom. "It looks like they used the closet as a storage room. I haven't gone through all of them."

"I'm surprised you got through any of them. Why did you?"

I shrugged. "I was curious. And there's no cable."

He lifted the top box. "I'll be back for the rest."

"Let me get my shoes and coat on, and I'll help," I said. Between the two of us, we got the boxes loaded into the back of his SUV. Before the last trip downstairs, I said, "Have you had breakfast? I've got some instant oatmeal."

"Thanks, but there will probably be something back at the station, and then maybe I'll even get to go home." He picked up one of the final boxes and said, "Ready for one more trip?"

I hefted the last box and followed him out. Now I wished I'd gone through all of them because I doubted I'd get another chance. Most of them looked like long-term storage, but I might have found more in the desk-clearing box now that I knew what to look for.

Once we got the final boxes squeezed into the back of the SUV, he closed the hatch and said, "Thanks. I'm hoping to get the toll tag info and the doorbell camera footage soon, and then I can clear you to leave town. Unfortunately, the highway's impassible between here and Dallas. There are semis stuck in the ice."

"What about the back roads? I didn't take the freeway."

"Those may not have stuck semis, but they're even icier, since most of the smaller towns around here don't have ice-removal equipment. You may as well make yourself comfortable here and wait it out unless you absolutely need to get home. The power to downtown is supposed to come back sometime this morning. They've already got it restored to most of the residential areas. I'll let you know when I hear something about your car."

"And my alibi?"

"I'll definitely let you know when you're clear to go."

"Unless the info you get doesn't clear me."

"Well, then I'll arrest you."

"Gee, if you keep being this nice to me, I'll start to think you don't suspect me anymore."

"I've always been nice to you. I just haven't let you off the hook." He got in his SUV and gave me a jaunty salute before driving off, the chains on his tires churning up the accumulated

sleet in the alley.

Once he was gone, I pondered what to do next. Without power, my options were limited. There wasn't a lot to do in the apartment. I might be able to read if I held the book close to a window. It actually wasn't that bad outside. It was cold, but the wind had stopped blowing, and it was no longer sleeting. I wondered if the library was open. I might be able to get Internet access there, and they might have a newspaper archive and a collection of school yearbooks. I could look up the suspects and see if there was any connection to that past case. Maybe my subconscious was on to something when I dreamed that the old article was linked to the current case. I knew finding the killer wasn't my job, but Wes hadn't exactly jumped on the lead when I mentioned the article, so he might not be pursuing that angle.

Solving not only the current case but also the case from the past would certainly be a way to make my mark on the town. It might even make up for being the one to find the last editor's body. I couldn't help but imagine the ceremony in which I got the key to the city. Okay, maybe I was being silly but, still, solving the two cases would make a great article that might help me get a new job if this one didn't work out. At the very least, I might be able to sell it as a freelancer and make a little money to tide me over until I got a new job.

As I recalled from my research prior to the interview, the library was a few blocks behind the movie theater. That was a mostly residential neighborhood, so they might have power. I went upstairs to get my purse and found that article copy lying next to it on the bed. I could have sworn I'd put it back in the box before Wes took the boxes. Oh well, I'd told Wes about it being there, and he knew about the case, so I left it where it was before I headed out. It wasn't likely to affect his investigation.

As I made my way through downtown, I could see what Wes meant about the roads being bad. They were covered in clumps of accumulated sleet that had frozen together. If the highways were

like this and if they weren't able to get to the highways to clear them, it would take a good streak of above-freezing weather to get things moving again. I remembered a storm not too many years ago that had paralyzed Dallas for days. If I was stuck here that long, even my emergency travel bag wouldn't be enough to sustain me.

The downtown business district ended abruptly a block behind Main Street, where a residential neighborhood began. Most of the homes looked like they'd been built around the same time as the downtown buildings, though there were a few newer homes scattered throughout the neighborhood, looking terribly out of place. Many of the older homes had been beautifully maintained or restored. Right next door might be a house that was falling down, with peeling paint and foil in the windows. One or two of the nicer, larger old homes had signs in front indicating that they were inns. I noticed lights on in most of the houses I passed, so my chances of finding power at the library looked good. I just hoped it would be open.

The library was in a massive old building that looked like it must be one of the Carnegie libraries scattered throughout the country, and it stood near an elementary school in the middle of the neighborhood. Lights shone through the high, arched front windows, so I went up the front steps and opened the heavy wooden door. The librarian sitting behind the front desk greeted me with a smile. "Good morning!" she said. "Come on in. We've got light and heat, so you're welcome to get comfortable. Or is there something else I can help you with?"

"Do you have a local interest collection?"

She was already pretty perky, but she perked up even more. "Sure do! Over there on that side of the building." She pointed to her right. "If there's something in particular you need to find, let me know. Most of the genealogy records are on microfilm. I'm afraid we don't yet have them digitized."

"Do you have any local school yearbooks?"

“Our collection goes all the way back, but if you want something before the fifties, we have those in the rare books collection to help preserve them. I can get them for you, though.”

“I only need to go back about twenty years.” I thanked her and went in the direction she’d pointed. The local interest section was pretty extensive, with a lot of books of local history—though, oddly enough, none of them were about the sideshow. I’d have thought that was the most interesting thing about the town’s past. Instead, the books were about the buildings, the cotton industry, and the founding families. I soon found the collection of school yearbooks. I got the one for the year Carolyn had graduated—and died—and took it to a nearby table. The librarian hadn’t been kidding about them having heat. I took off my coat before I sat down.

The yearbook had been published during the summer after the school year, so it contained pictures of late events like prom and graduation. It also had a memorial page for Carolyn Stevens, with her senior portrait, a photo of her giving her graduation speech, and quotes from her classmates. I couldn’t help but think of what Wes had said about the insincerity of those grieving her. The comments about her were trite and superficial, like the students were trying to come up with something nice to say in spite of knowing nothing about her. Then again, they were teenagers confronting an event that must have seemed unfathomable at their age. I could hardly expect elegiac masterpieces.

I checked the index and looked up everything about Carolyn in the book. She’d been in the band and on the newspaper staff and had been voted Most Likely to Succeed. There were no social pictures of her, no candid shots of her hanging out with friends. She didn’t look all that nerdy to me. She was even rather pretty, in a classic girl-next-door way. This was the kind of girl who probably would have blossomed once she was away from the small town and all their preconceived notions about her. My heart broke for her and all the things she’d never had a chance to do. Had

someone stolen that from her?

Danny Jefferson was the salutatorian. Was that the teacher who'd been caught up in scandal? Since his name and picture hadn't been in the newspaper, the image I saw meant nothing to me. He was just another teenage boy with wavy brown hair in need of a trim and glasses. When I was a teenager, I would probably have found him rather cute. Based on my knowledge of high school cliques, he looked like the kind of person who might have hung out with Carolyn Stevens. Even if they hadn't dated or even been friends, they probably would have ended up at the same cafeteria table. If he'd had something to do with her death, that could hurt his ability to fight off the scandal at the school, which might give him motive for murder. I found him in the Seniors section and snapped a picture of that yearbook page with my phone. He didn't have a lot of activities listed in the index, just National Honor Society, and there were no candid photos.

I skimmed through the rest of the Seniors section, looking for familiar names. Not that I knew that many people in this town, but most of the ones I knew or knew of were connected with the Ogden case. The only name I recognized other than Danny's was Andy Parker—the future disgraced reverend? He did look like an early version of the man pictured in the newspaper stories about that scandal, with neat blond hair and a smug smile. His face was rounder now, but I thought I'd still recognize him. I guessed that he was on the golf team and was probably in one of the religious or service organizations. A check of the index proved me right. Finding out that the editor who'd revealed his indiscretions might link him to something worse would be a pretty good motive for murder. I took a picture of that page, too.

There weren't any other familiar names in the senior class, but there were only about a hundred and twenty seniors. Out of curiosity, I flipped through the other classes. Wes had said he was a freshman then and, sure enough, there he was. His photo was in black and white, so I couldn't tell just how red his hair had been

then, but it looked the way red hair usually looks in grayscale. He'd matured since then, but was recognizably the same person. I checked the index and found that he was on the freshman basketball team. In the team photo, he wasn't the tallest, but he was so lanky he was swallowed up by the baggy uniform shorts. He was in the same service club with Andy Parker and was also in the science club and the band, where he'd played trumpet.

Jordan Randall was in that class as well and, bless his heart, he looked like the stereotypical geek, with slicked-down hair and glasses held together with tape. His white dress shirt was buttoned all the way up, but his neck was thin enough that the collar didn't look snug, in spite of the buttons. His grin was cheerful, welcoming, even. He played trombone in the band and was in the science club with Wes, and when I checked that group photo again, I saw that they were next to each other. There was also a candid photo in the Freshmen section of the two of them sitting together in the cafeteria. They seemed an unlikely pairing, the jock and the geek, but I suspected that a member of the science club had a pretty strong nerdy streak, even if he was tall enough to play basketball.

I flipped back to the memorial page. Danny Jefferson had been quoted on it, but Andy Parker hadn't. I took note of the other names on the page. Would the killer have given a quote out of guilt or avoided it entirely?

I leaned back in my chair, thinking. Surely it wasn't coincidence that two classmates—who might have been at the same graduation party—of a possible murder victim from years ago also had reason in the present to be worried about the newspaper editor, who happened to be looking into the past incident. And both of them had been seen near the newspaper office near the time of the editor's death.

Now, what could I do with this information?

Chapter Thirteen

Surely I wasn't the only one who'd made this connection. Wes knew who Ruthie had seen near the office, and he'd said that he read the newspaper, so had to know about the scandals. He might even have investigated those cases. He'd been in school with these people. I'd clued him in about Ogden having the article. He probably knew even more than I did, since he had the full context. I could probably leave it all in his hands.

Besides, I couldn't interview my suspects. I didn't work for any newspaper right now, so it wasn't as though I could go up to a complete stranger and ask him questions about his high school years out of personal curiosity. I didn't know where to find these people. Danny Jefferson was on administrative leave from the school, so he wouldn't be there even if school was in session on a day when the roads were impassible. The reverend had been kicked out of his church, so he wouldn't be there. I might be able to track down their home addresses, but that wasn't likely to get me anything more than a door slammed in my face.

But still, I thought it was worth pursuing, and I wasn't sure Wes was doing so. Maybe what he needed was a fresh perspective. If he'd known these people his whole life, he might not be able to imagine them as killers, so he might overlook something.

What I usually did in a situation like this when I was reporting was find people who knew the suspects and casually chat with those people. It was amazing what friends and colleagues would

say to anyone who showed the slightest interest, especially if there was juicy gossip to be shared. People wanted to show off their inside knowledge. I needed to know who'd been friends with Andy and Danny in school. That might give me some insight into whether they were involved with Carolyn's death, and since this was their hometown, those same people might still be friends now and able to tell me what they thought about Ogden.

"We have a complete archive of the local newspaper," someone near me whispered. I looked up to see a librarian straight out of an old movie, complete with bun, cat-eye glasses, and buttoned-up cardigan. "They're bound on those shelves over there."

"Thanks," I said.

She raised a finger to her lips to shush me and went on her way. I hadn't been looking for the newspaper, since I'd already searched the archives. Now that I thought about it, though, doing keyword searches meant I was missing context. I got up to head where she'd pointed, but I didn't see her anymore. "Okay, stealth librarian," I muttered.

The paper was only published once a week, so it shouldn't take me much time to get through a whole year. The newspapers were bound in six-month volumes. I found the volume that should contain the story about Carolyn Stevens's death and pulled it off the shelf to take back to my table. The first issue of the year included a story about local boy Clark Keaton being the MVP of the college bowl game he'd just played in. The picture with the article didn't look all that different than he looked now, except for the glasses. Even in a football uniform, he looked like he should have an S on his chest. The pads gave him even bigger shoulders.

In the next issue, the freshman basketball team had won a tournament. There was an action photo of Wes shooting a basket. As I went on, I saw that Andy Parker had been part of a group spending spring break on a church mission trip to Central America. Carolyn Stevens and Danny Jefferson had been awarded college scholarships. Andy Parker and his date—the future ex-Mrs. Parker?

—were nominated for prom king and queen.

Then there was graduation. The pre-graduation issue had thumbnail photos of each graduate and articles about the valedictorian and salutatorian, with larger pictures of Carolyn and Danny. The article mentioned her plans to one day go to medical school. She wanted to work with children suffering from cancer. My throat grew tight as I read about her, knowing her fate. She was the kind of person I might have been friends with in school. If she'd lived, she'd be a doctor by now. She'd have made it through medical school and her residency, and she'd be helping children have a chance at life. She might even have children of her own.

She was also on the front page of the next issue, but for an entirely different reason. They'd run the same photo, her senior portrait, with an article about her disappearance. She was last seen at a graduation party, hadn't come home, her car hadn't been seen, her cell phone wasn't registering on any towers, and her parents were frantic. There was a phone number to call if anyone had any information.

The same senior portrait was on the front page of the next issue, alongside a photo of a battered car being pulled out of the riverbed. That was the article I'd found in the box. The following issue contained her obituary and an article on her funeral, which had been held at the football stadium to accommodate the crowd. The high school band had played, and it looked like she'd had far more attention in death than she ever received in life. I didn't recognize the names of any of the people who'd spoken. I hoped for Carolyn's sake that at least one of them had been a real friend. Not being popular wasn't the same as having no friends. In fact, some of the unpopular kids might actually have more real friends than the popular ones did, in my experience.

This had been before social media took over the world, so I doubted I'd find much online. At best, there might have been some LiveJournal accounts that might or might not still be around, even if they were no longer active.

I got the previous volume of the newspaper archive so I could see the rest of the school year. There wasn't much about any of the names I recognized. Wes and Jordan were pictured in the band at a pep rally. Andy and his future ex-wife were nominated for homecoming king and queen. Clark Keaton was doing well in his first season of college football. Carolyn and Danny won a few awards. I wondered if they'd been academic rivals. Had they been neck and neck for class rank? Would that have been a motive for murder? They were both in the top ten percent of their class, so they'd have both been eligible for the major state universities. The valedictorian got a year of free tuition at a state school, but I didn't think that would pass to the next in line if the valedictorian died after graduation.

So far, Danny Jefferson was at the top of my suspect list. He was the most likely to have had any connection to Carolyn while in school and might have seen her as a rival who'd beaten him out as valedictorian, which robbed him of prestige and possibly some funding. I glanced back at the pre-graduation articles. He'd gone to a private university, so the valedictorian scholarship wouldn't have helped him unless the school matched it. The view of them as rivals was purely a guess based on general social dynamics. For all I knew, they were the best of friends. "Was Danny at the party?" I wrote in my notebook. He had a reason to be angry with Paul Ogden in the present, and he'd been in the vicinity at the right time.

Andy Parker was a more tenuous connection. There was no indication that he'd had any interaction with Carolyn while in school, but then his more recent behavior suggested that he might be prone to secret relationships. Would the prom king have fooled around with the valedictorian behind the back of the prom queen? If so, it was the would-be prom queen who'd had motive to murder the valedictorian.

Ooh, there was a thought. Mrs. Parker would have had reason to be mad at Paul Ogden, depending on how she took her

husband's infidelity. There were women who were more concerned with maintaining their social position and avoiding scandal than with their husbands' behavior. She might have known he wasn't faithful, but she liked being the Mrs. Reverend. She'd lost as much as her husband had, since she'd lost him and her position in the community. She hadn't been seen downtown, but Ruthie admitted she hadn't been watching the entire time.

I flipped the yearbook open again and looked up the future Mrs. Parker. Her name was Ashley Nichols, and she'd been a cheerleader and student council representative in addition to being a member of the homecoming and prom courts and being elected the Spring Blossom Queen. She'd been voted Most Popular, and she'd been Miss Stirling Mills, going on to compete in the Texas Junior Miss pageant, where she'd been a semifinalist. She didn't seem like someone who'd have been threatened by a girl who was a relative nobody.

On a hunch, I got the next volume of newspapers and, sure enough, there was a wedding announcement in an August issue. She and her high school sweetheart, Andy Parker, had been married at a local church, where his father was pastor, in early July. They were going to stay in Stirling Mills while he commuted to Waco to attend Baylor University. There was no mention of where she went to college. If she'd been a professional preacher's wife with no education and no job experience and she was suddenly left on her own after her husband's infidelity and wrongdoing were exposed, it was entirely possible that she might blame the editor who blew it all open.

But could she have killed Ogden? In the yearbook cheerleading photos, she'd been near the top of all the pyramids, and she didn't come far above Parker's shoulder in their prom and homecoming photos, so she probably wasn't a very big person. Maybe she'd put her ex up to it—take out the man who ruined their lives and they could get back together. It sounded more like a Lifetime movie than like something anyone would actually do, but I added her to

my list.

Then there was Jordan. About the only thing I had on him was that Ogden had criticized him and he might have the technical know-how to tamper with my car's electrical system. There didn't seem to have been any connection between him and Carolyn in school, and a geeky freshman probably hadn't been at the graduation party. As for Ogden's criticism, it was nothing compared to what he got in the national press. He probably dried any tears the criticism caused with hundred-dollar bills and went on with his life.

There was one more person connected to the case. Investigating a murder would be the ideal way to cover up for having committed it, and that might explain why Wes refused to clear me as a suspect, but would he have wanted an inquisitive reporter to stick around, even as a possible patsy? He probably hadn't been at the graduation party, either. I didn't think he was a likely suspect.

Clark Keaton had been in the wrong class to be at the party. It didn't look like he'd come back to town after he graduated until he was running for office, and he wanted Ogden's endorsement. His aide had been in the area at the time of the killing, but she looked a few years younger than I was, so she would have maybe been in junior high, at most, at the time of Carolyn's death, if she was even local. And there was Margarita, who didn't seem to have any connection to anything.

It wasn't a very comprehensive list of suspects, and it had to be missing a lot of people because I barely knew anyone. The party was probably the key. Something that had happened at that party may have led to Carolyn's death—someone she'd met, someone she'd given a ride to, someone she'd had a fight with, something she'd learned. Or maybe even something she'd drunk that led her to have an accident. I went back to the yearbook to make a list of people who were likely to have been at that party. My high school experience hadn't been typical, since I'd gone to a Department of Defense school in Germany, and we didn't have the same kinds of

teams and activities, while we also had a different kind of caste system based on parents' ranks and positions. But I suspected I could count on the cheerleaders and football stars being there, along with the members of the homecoming and prom courts. Would a preacher's son like Andy Parker have been at a party like that? Probably not officially, but he might have gone on the sly—which could have meant he'd want to cover up his presence. Even if it had just been an ordinary accident, if he'd been with Carolyn he might have abandoned her rather than reporting it.

I went to one of the computer workstations and pulled up the newspaper website to see if I could find any information on where these people were now. I found obituaries for three of them, which cleared them in Ogden's murder. One had died in an accident and two of cancer. I found a couple of the former football players in the police blotter for petty theft and drunk driving. One of the cheerleaders was a Realtor who'd won a national award. Most of the people on my list had wedding announcements, many of them to each other. The paper didn't announce divorces, but I couldn't help but wonder how many of them were still married. Nothing jumped out at me as being an obvious red flag that told me a person was likely to have killed two people, nearly twenty years apart.

So, what had tipped off Paul Ogden? Why had he dug up that old case now? My dream had said it was the ghost, but in the light of day it seemed highly unlikely that the ghost of a former editor had appeared and told him to dig into an old case because the spirit of the dead girl was restless. Something must have sparked his interest. He must have heard something that made him suspicious, maybe while he was investigating some other story.

My stomach growled, and I realized it was lunchtime. I got up to put away the things I'd taken out, but the same cardiganed librarian passed by again and said, "Leave it there. The librarians will put it away, and this way they can record that you used these things. All they care about is numbers these days. They have to

prove their value to the community with statistics.” She said it with a haughty sniff.

I felt weird leaving a mess, but I obeyed. I put my notebook and pen back in my purse, put on my coat, and headed back out into the cold. The sun had come out, and melting ice dripped off the eaves. There were puddles in sunny spots on the ground. If it refroze during the night, there really would be a problem, as Wes had said.

Hoping power had been restored downtown, I made my way to the diner. When I got about a block away, I could see that the “Open” sign was lit and there were lights on inside. There weren’t many cars parked there, but when I got inside, the place was full. The same waitress was there, and she greeted me when I entered. “Sit wherever you can find a space,” she said. “You may need to share a table.”

I spotted a woman sitting alone and approached. “Mind if I join you?” I asked. She nodded, but I took it as a “go ahead” nod rather than a “yes, I mind” nod and took off my coat and hung it on the hook over the booth before I took the seat across from her. She stared into the coffee cup she held between her hands, not looking at me, so I didn’t try to make conversation. Instead, I took one of the laminated menus out of the rack and studied it.

I was trying to decide between the soup-and-sandwich combo or another bowl of dumplings when a commotion at the end of the car caught my attention. I heard someone say, “No, don’t, not here,” and next thing I knew, I had an angry blonde right out of a reality TV series leaning over my table and shouting, “How dare you show your face in here? You killed him to get his job, didn’t you? You’re the only one it could have been!”

Chapter Fourteen

I didn't know what to say. I'd faced angry people before, but that was usually because of something I'd written. Some people take really badly to having the truth exposed. In this case, I knew I was absolutely innocent, but I doubted there was anything I could say to change her mind, so I let her rant at me. She was only making herself look bad by making a scene. That didn't make it fun to sit and take it, though. I wanted to hit her and run away, but I couldn't. Instead, I tried to zone out and let her vitriol wash over and around me.

If I wasn't mistaken, my assailant was Ashley Parker. I could still see the high school cheerleader in her face, though the years hadn't been too kind to her. Several children and a lot of church potlucks had altered her figure, and trying to maintain her girlish blond hair color even as adulthood darkened it had left it looking fried. Her makeup had been applied with a heavy hand, and not particularly well, especially when seen from so close. The skin on her face had been weathered by years of tanning.

"She didn't do a thing, Ashley," a voice behind me said. I turned to see Wes approaching down the aisle, in uniform now. "She was in Dallas less than an hour before the time of death, so there's no way she could have been here in time to kill Paul Ogden." He walked as he spoke, and he came to stand right beside my booth, in her personal space. She took a step backward. "Now, why don't you go back to your table?" he added in a tone that

made it clear it was an order, no matter how politely he phrased it. “Unless Miss Lincoln would like to press charges for assault.”

“I didn’t touch her,” Ashley said, taking another step away from my table.

“If you’d touched her, the charges would be for assault and battery.”

A man came up and tugged at her arm. “Come on, Ash,” he said. If I wasn’t mistaken, that was Andy. He looked a lot like the more recent photos that had been in the newspaper, but he’d lost some hair, grayed, and put on weight since then. I could barely see the handsome boy he’d once been.

“No need for charges,” I said. Ashley let her ex-husband lead her away. Or was he an ex? I’d assumed she’d dumped him after his cheating was revealed, but they looked pretty friendly. Was it possible she blamed Ogden rather than her husband? My theory that she put her husband up to killing the man who ruined their lives was starting to look good, especially if she was trying to deflect blame to me. And if she was trying to deflect blame to me, did that mean she’d also sabotaged my car so my GPS couldn’t clear me?

Wes took the seat across from me. I started to tell him it was already taken, but there was now no sign of the woman who’d been sitting there. Even her coffee cup was gone. She must have slipped out during the commotion. I could hardly blame her. “Your neighbor’s doorbell camera video showed you leaving your apartment at eight thirty,” he said. “Even giving a broad window for time of death, you couldn’t have made it here in time to kill Paul Ogden.”

“Yeah, I know. That’s what I’ve been telling you all along.”

“But now I have actual evidence. Also, your neighbor is incredibly creepy.” He shuddered. “He offered me a lot more video of you coming and going. You should move as soon as you can.”

“Getting a lease when you’re unemployed isn’t easy.”

“From what I understand, there’s a job offer on the table. One

that comes with an apartment.”

I rubbed the back of my neck. “Ow. I think I just got whiplash. That was a pretty quick transition from ‘I think you murdered the newspaper editor to take his job’ to ‘You should take the newspaper editor job.’”

“For the record, I never really thought you were a murderer. But there are procedures to follow, and I can’t let my personal assumptions get in the way of that. And, as you’ve seen”—he moved his head slightly in the direction of Ashley—“there might be those who suspect you anyway. By going through the proper process and getting evidence, I can remove all doubt.”

I leaned toward him across the table and said softly, “Speaking of her, you know Ruthie saw her husband downtown around the time of death.”

He, too, leaned forward, so our heads were almost touching. “I know. I interviewed the witnesses.”

“I’m just saying, I find it interesting that she would bother making a scene like that to accuse me. Based on the coverage I saw in the paper, you’d think she’d have been dancing on Paul Ogden’s grave. He pretty much ruined her life.”

“He let her know her husband was cheating on her.”

“Exactly. Looks like she’s back with him, or maybe still with him or, at the very least, is open to getting back with him. I’d say she blames Ogden more than she blames her husband.”

He leaned back against the booth. “Huh. I hadn’t thought of it that way.”

The waitress came by. “What can I get for you, or have you had time to look?”

“Do you still have any dumplings?” Wes asked her.

“For you, hon? Sure thing.” She turned to me. “And you?”

“They were so good yesterday, I’ll go for that again.”

“Anything to drink?” With a grin, she asked, “Some hot water for you?”

I was touched that she’d remembered. Was this what it was like

to be a regular somewhere? And I'd only been in town for a little more than a day. "Actually, yeah. I could use a cup of tea."

"Iced tea for me," Wes said.

"I'll get that for you in just a second."

When she was gone, Wes said, "Oh, I forgot, I have more good news for you. Your car's working fine. Your radio presets got wiped and your GPS software had to be reinstalled, so any saved locations are gone, but everything's working fine."

"What's that going to cost me?"

"Nothing. Nothing was wrong. By the time they got it to the shop, everything was okay. You're good to go whenever the roads clear. You're no longer a part of the murder inquiry, and your car is in working order. Unfortunately, the roads between here and Dallas are still a mess, and it'll be worse tomorrow. But we're supposed to get more than twenty four hours above freezing starting tomorrow afternoon. I can take you to pick up your car, but I'd recommend you leave it there until the roads are better. It's safer parked where no one's likely to slide into it."

"Yay," I said without enthusiasm. I didn't know much about electronics, but it seemed awfully weird to me that a car's electrical system could completely fail like that and then work again without anyone doing anything. There had to be *something* wrong with it. "Are they sure there's nothing wrong, no loose connection, or anything like that? I don't want to be halfway back to Dallas, in the middle of nowhere, and have it all go out again."

"They checked it over thoroughly. You're good. It must have just been a momentary glitch."

"An interestingly timed one."

The waitress came back with my hot water and his iced tea, along with our bowls of dumplings. I selected a tea bag from my purse and dunked it in my mug. "You take your tea seriously," he noted.

"I used to live in England and developed a habit."

"You don't sound English."

I explained about living abroad while my father was in the air force, and he shook his head. "I've never lived anywhere but here, except when I went off to college."

"And I've never lived anywhere for more than four years. I used to sometimes wish we could stay in one place because we always seemed to move right when things were going well, but now I get itchy being in one place for too long."

"What do you consider your hometown?"

"I don't really have one. We only lived in the place where I was born a few months after that. My extended family is scattered all over. My dad retired in San Antonio and that's where my parents live, so when I say I'm going 'home,' like for the holidays, that's what I mean. We did live there a few years, so I guess it counts, though I wouldn't have any ties there if my parents weren't there."

"That must be weird, not really being from anywhere."

"Sometimes. I'll admit, I have occasionally thought about how nice it would be to be from a place like this, with family around."

We settled in to a conversation about him growing up with his father as a cop and how that compared to having an air force officer for a dad. When he wasn't suspecting me of murder, he wasn't so bad. I couldn't help but compare the man sitting across from me to the boy I'd seen in the yearbook. "I'm curious about one thing," I said. "You seem to be acting as a detective on this case, but you're in uniform."

"We don't have much call for a detective squad in this town. I've had the training, so I do it when we need it, but otherwise I work as the lieutenant in the force, helping the chief run the department."

"Your dad the chief?" I hoped the man I'd met the day before wasn't his father.

"Not right now. He passed away last year."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"Yeah, it was pretty sudden. His grand plan was to bring me up and train me to replace him. He'd retire, and I could step into his

shoes. But then he had a massive heart attack long before I was ready for the job, so they had to hire someone from outside the town.” I got the impression from the look in his eyes and the way his lips twitched that he had a lot more to say on that subject, but he didn’t dare do so in public.

“You must be a pretty good detective if you managed to track me down just now.”

“Actually, I came here for lunch. I wasn’t looking for you. I called you earlier and left you a message.”

I found my phone in my purse and saw the notification. “Sorry. I turned the ringer off while I was in the library.”

“What were you doing in the library?”

I tried to look innocent. “Reading. They have a good local interest collection that includes a set of yearbooks.” I couldn’t resist a smile. “Science club? Really?”

A wash of pink spread up from his collar. “We got to play with robots and chemicals. It was fun. And why were you reading old yearbooks?”

I shrugged one shoulder. “I was curious. I wanted to learn more about the town.”

“I’ve got this case under control. You don’t have to worry about it.”

“But what if I want to? I’m an unemployed reporter stuck in a small town because of an ice storm. This morning there was no electricity. I don’t have my charger cable, so I wouldn’t have been able to recharge my phone even if there had been any power. I had to find something to do for fun.”

He pulled a coiled cable from his coat pocket and handed it to me. “I thought you might want this. I noticed it when I was checking out your car. Though I don’t know how much good it will do, since I doubt there’s a USB port in that apartment.”

“I have a wall plug in my travel bag. I just didn’t have the cable, since that’s always in my car for the car charger. Thanks.” It had been rather thoughtful of him to know I’d likely need it.

“Seriously, Lexie, I don’t need you investigating this case. We’re spread thin enough without us having to worry about your safety. If the killer thinks you know something, it could put you in danger, especially if he killed Ogden because of a story he was working on.”

“I don’t think going to the library is going to put me in danger.”

“But talking about what you learned might.”

Then I supposed I was lucky I hadn’t said anything about Carolyn Stevens to anyone other than Wes, especially if the cases were linked.

The waitress brought our checks, and he grabbed mine before I had a chance at it. “It’s on me,” he said. “After all, you wouldn’t be stuck here if it wasn’t for me.”

“Gee, at the rate people keep paying for my meals, I might come to like this town.”

“I’m not the first?”

“Your friend Jordan bought me dinner last night. He pretty much treated everyone in the restaurant.”

“He just loves throwing his money around.”

“Better than hoarding it.”

He sighed heavily. “I guess so.” He got out of the booth. “I can give you a ride back to the apartment, if you like.”

It wasn’t far, but it was cold and slippery, so I took him up on the offer. We didn’t talk much during the short drive. Before he let me out at the foot of the stairs, he said, “Remember, we haven’t caught the killer, so be careful.”

It was a sobering reminder. “I will,” I assured him.

I made my way carefully up the stairs. The sun hadn’t hit this area, so there was still ice on the steps. I unlocked the door, and as soon as I went inside, I knew something was wrong. My bag had been emptied all over the floor, and books lay in front of the bookcase. The place had been ransacked.

Chapter Fifteen

I immediately stepped out of the apartment and turned to see if Wes was still there. He hadn't yet driven away, so I waved my arms to get his attention. I couldn't tell if he'd seen me, so I made my way down the stairs as carefully as I could while still moving quickly. He started to drive off just as I reached the foot of the stairs. I shouted and waved as I ran after him, and he stopped. I made it to his side of the SUV, and he rolled down the window. "What is it?" he asked.

After all that exertion, I was short of breath. "Someone's been in the apartment," I managed to say between gasps for air, "and it looks like they were searching for something."

He put the vehicle in park and got out. "You wait in here. I'll leave the heater on. I'll go check it out."

"You'll need me to know what's missing or different."

"I won't need you to know if someone's still in there."

"Oh." That hadn't occurred to me. I hadn't noticed any sign of a break-in, so the killer must have used the key he swiped from Ogden. The flood of adrenaline that comes after a close call gave me the shakes. What if I'd nearly caught the killer? If I'd stayed there a second longer, he might have come out of the bedroom or closet, or wherever he was, and realized I knew too much. I climbed into the driver's seat and shut the door as I watched Wes run up the stairs, his gun drawn. He looked rather like an action hero as he threw the door open and entered the apartment.

Come to think of it, the door had been locked from the outside when I arrived. That suggested that no one was inside. If the culprit had wanted to keep out intruders while he ransacked the place, he'd have thrown the interior deadbolt, not just the lock that could be opened from outside. I hadn't had a close brush with death, after all. I knew Wes was following procedure by making sure the apartment was clear, but I also knew that in about a minute he'd come back for me. I turned off the engine, took the keys, and headed for the stairs.

Sure enough, I ran into Wes on the landing. "I told you to stay in the car," he said.

"I realized the door was locked from the outside, so I knew nobody was inside." I dropped his keys into his hand as I passed him to enter the apartment.

He followed me inside. "Still, I told you to stay in the car. I didn't present you with a logic puzzle to solve."

"Maybe if you had, I'd have been distracted enough not to figure this one out. There wasn't anyone in here, was there?"

"Nope. So, now that you're in here, what's different or missing?"

I scanned the room. "Well, the books have been pulled off the bookcase. That definitely wasn't me. And they emptied my bag. I wasn't the one who scattered stuff all over the floor. Though I did put my suit on that chair." It was a little embarrassing having my underwear on public display and, worse, I suspected they'd bring in a crime scene unit and take pictures of it. Fortunately, I packed ordinary, basic stuff, so there wasn't anything for anyone to get excited about. At worst, he'd decide I was incredibly boring and not at all sexy, based on my underwear choices. "I'd guess he searched my bag."

We moved to the kitchen, which looked okay. When Wes opened the cabinet doors, I could tell that things had been moved, but they'd been put back more or less in order. The bedroom seemed like it had hardly been touched. I couldn't tell that

anything was different. Either the culprit hadn't made it to the bedroom or had managed to put everything back exactly the way it had been. "It looks to me like something must have disturbed him while he was searching the living room, and he had to take off before putting things back," I remarked. "Maybe he looked out the window and saw us coming from the diner, so we barely missed him." What if I hadn't run into Wes at the diner and had come back alone? What if I'd come back to the apartment before lunch? I shuddered at the thought of all the possibilities.

"If he didn't happen to be staring out the window at the right time, that means he had a lookout."

I tried to remember if I'd seen anyone on the street as we came back from lunch, but I hadn't been paying much attention. They wouldn't have had to be outside. Someone in one of the upstairs offices or apartments along the street might have had a good view and could have called the person searching to warn him in time.

"Is anything missing that you can tell?" Wes asked when we returned to the living room.

I scanned the floor, doing a mental inventory of my overnight bag and what I remembered of the apartment's contents. "No. But there wasn't anything to take. You already got those boxes. My guess is he got frustrated when he didn't find anything in the bedroom or kitchen and just started pulling stuff out in the living room." At that moment, I realized what was missing and froze. "No, wait," I said, running back to the bedroom.

Wes was right on my heels. "What is it?"

"That article copy I told you about, the one about Carolyn Stevens. I thought I put it back in the box, but I found it after you left, and I left it on the bed. It's not here."

Frowning, he said, "But anyone could have found that in the archives."

"I think the key may not be so much the article itself, but the fact that he now knows I've seen it. Maybe that was what got Paul Ogden killed—he was investigating that old case." I didn't tell him

that I'd dreamed a ghost prodded me to research it because that sounded crazy. "He was probably looking to see what else Ogden had. That may be why he broke into the office last night, and when he didn't find anything there, he searched the apartment."

Since the article had been migrating around the apartment, I dropped to the floor to look under and around the bed. I saw a familiar piece of paper just behind the bedspread's flounce and went weak with relief, resting my cheek against the floor. When I thought I could speak without squeaking or my voice shaking, I said, "No, wait, it's here under the bed. It must have blown off. This apartment seems to be pretty drafty." I grabbed the article and sat up. Wes reached a hand down to pull me back to my feet.

"Was there anything else in those boxes that might have been relevant?" he asked. "I haven't had a chance to go through them yet."

I shook my head. "Not that I could tell. There was nothing related to that article, so if Ogden had any additional evidence, it wasn't in there. There was the complaint against Danny Jefferson, and he was in the same graduating class as Carolyn Stevens."

"And Ruthie saw him near the office yesterday morning," he added with a nod.

"I noticed that the former reverend and his wife were in that same class."

He frowned. "They were in the diner while we were, but I don't remember when they left. Would they have had time to come here and search?"

"They'd have known I wasn't here." Had they stuck around, or had they left the diner after that confrontation? I'd paid no attention to them once they left me alone.

"The first thing we need to do is get the locks changed on this building."

"And, let me guess, you're going to have a crime scene team in here, so you need me out."

"I'd like to check for prints. I want all the evidence I can get."

Even if I can't pin the murder on this guy, I'd like to have a few other charges in my back pocket. Breaking and entering isn't much, but it's better than nothing."

"You're not going to take my clothes as evidence, are you?" I gestured to where the contents of my bag lay scattered on the floor around the empty bag.

"We won't get good prints off cloth, so I just need a few photos of the scene."

"Good. Because having the few things I've got left here in this town taken would really be the last straw. As it is, I'm running out of places I can go if I can't stay here. I've got a few hours before Margarita opens for dinner. I guess I could go back to the library."

"I'll let you in the office. We're done down there. I'll have to come around from the other side to unlock the door. Once I'm out, lock the back door from the inside."

He stepped onto the balcony, and I shut and locked the door, fastening the chain for good measure. A couple of minutes later, there was a knock at the door on the side wall of the living room and Wes called out. I unlocked the interior deadbolt and opened the door to find a staircase down to the press room. Wes stood on the stairs. The printing press was silent for the moment, but I suspected that anyone who lived in that apartment would want to be out while the paper was being printed. I followed Wes downstairs, where he opened the interior door that led to the newsroom. It looked pretty much the same as it had the previous morning, though presumably without the body on the floor. I couldn't quite bring myself to go around the desk to where the murder had happened. "It's okay to touch stuff now?" I asked.

"Be my guest. There may still be a bit of dust around from fingerprinting."

I wasn't sure what to do while waiting in the office. There weren't any books, and although I had the charging cable for my phone, the wall plug was upstairs, currently serving as evidence of the break-in. As were the books in the apartment. I didn't have

access to the computer. I was good at amusing myself, but the resources here were limited. I didn't relish the idea of sitting alone in the office all afternoon, and not just because someone had died there so recently. The killer had a key to this place, and there was a possibility that he knew (or suspected) that I knew Ogden had been looking into Carolyn Stevens's death. I might be better off in public. But getting to anywhere else would require walking on my own. Not a lot of people were out today.

"How long do you expect the crime scene team to take?" I asked.

"I haven't even called it in. I don't think we have a lot of other crime scenes today, but those personnel have other duties, and they might be busy with accident scenes."

"So, hours? All afternoon? Will I be able to sleep there tonight?"

"Definitely by tonight. I'll make sure of that. But I don't know how long. I'm sorry. I know this has been one inconvenience after another for you."

"Next time I find a body, I'm skipping town rather than reporting it."

"We'd have found the information about your interview when we eventually found the body, and Ruthie might have seen you arrive and leave, and then you'd have had a lot of questions to answer."

"I had questions to answer, anyway."

There was a sharp knock on the front door, and I looked up to see the three witches, as I'd come to think of the newspaper board, standing outside. Evelyn wore a different color of coat and hat but still looked like Queen Elizabeth. Patricia was still in pink, but the pants under her pink parka were purple today. Lupe was still dressed all in black.

"Ah, here you are," Evelyn said when Wes let them in. "The apartment door was locked, and there was no answer there, even though the police car was parked in back."

"It's a crime scene," Wes explained. "Someone broke in while Lexie was out. Which reminds me, you need to get all the locks in this building changed. It looks like the killer took Ogden's keys."

"And you let her stay here last night, alone?" Evelyn scolded.

He actually blushed and ducked his head. "Sorry. We didn't realize he took the keys. We just didn't find any. But the doors lock from the inside, so she was safe while she was there." I noticed he didn't mention the break-in the night before. Was he scared of these women? It certainly looked like it.

"He did check on me last night," I said, trying to look and sound innocent. He shot me a horrified look.

"Well, that's good. Chivalry isn't dead," Evelyn snapped. "We understand that Miss Lincoln has been officially cleared in the case."

"Yes, I verified her alibi."

"Unfortunately, I'm still stuck here, thanks to the weather," I said.

"If you'd be open to keeping busy in the meantime, we have a proposition for you," Patricia said.

"As I'm sure you've noticed," Lupe said dryly, "we currently have no newspaper editor. The murder of Paul Ogden is likely one of the biggest stories we'll have all year, and there's no one to cover it. Even if you aren't interested in taking the job on a full-time basis—"

"Which would be totally understandable," Patricia interrupted.

"—we were wondering if you'd be interested in an interim position, just to get the next issue out. We feel we owe it to poor Paul to at least cover his murder."

"I believe most of the content for the next issue was already written," Evelyn said. "You'd just need to write this story, and possibly something about the ice storm, and shepherd the paper through production. That would give you something to do while you wait for the roads to clear, and you'll be done at about the time you're able to head home."

My first instinct was to decline. I'd already been publicly accused of killing Ogden to take his job, and I doubted that the facts would discourage that rumor. Actually taking the job, even if only temporarily, would only add fuel to the fire.

Before I could speak, I got hit in the face with a puff of cigarette smoke. I turned to see Jean Jacobs, just as she'd appeared in my dream the night before, standing at my shoulder. "I think you should take it," she said.

If I was seeing her in broad daylight, either I'd snapped completely or I really was seeing a ghost.

Chapter Sixteen

I closed my eyes for a moment, then opened them again to find that Jean was still there. I was pretty sure I was wide awake, unless this whole morning, lunch, and the break-in had all been part of the same dream and I was about to wake up to find that the day still hadn't started. My legs felt watery, but I wasn't close to anything that would allow me to just casually sit down or even lean against it so I didn't collapse, and I wasn't sure I trusted my legs enough to try taking a step.

"You got it, I'm real," Jean said. She put her cigarette to her lips, inhaled, and blew a smoke ring. "Well, in a manner of speaking. I'm not corporeal, but you really are seeing me."

I turned back to the board members and Wes, who all stood staring at me expectantly. They didn't seem to have noticed Jean. At least, they didn't react to the other person in the room. Either they were used to her or they didn't see her. Forcing myself not to glance at Jean and willing my voice to sound steady, I said, "I came here to interview to be a reporter and assistant editor. I'm not sure I'm up to diving in headfirst as editor at the last second. I don't have a lot of experience with that."

"You've got more experience than anyone else who might be available, and you'll have plenty of help," Evelyn said. "Most of the editing work is already done. What we need you to do is write the stories that are the big news of the week, and I'm sure you're more than capable of doing that."

“You know, taking on this job would give you an excuse to ask all kinds of questions,” Jean said with a grin before she took another puff from her cigarette. “You’d be back on the case, and that cop couldn’t do anything about it. That would let you look into those leads and theories you came up with at the library.”

I barely stopped myself from turning to look at her. I might not have been sure I wanted the job, but I didn’t want these people thinking I was nuts. Another puff of smoke hit me in the face, and I started coughing. How did she know I’d come up with leads and theories in the library? Had she been upstairs when I was talking to Wes about it, or had she been in the library? That was if she was even real. I wasn’t sure I was ready to take her word for it. Maybe this was all a stress-induced hallucination. I’d had a lot happen to me lately.

“Are you okay?” Patricia asked. If I wasn’t mistaken, she was fighting hard not to smile. Did she find my discomfort amusing? “I hope you’re not coming down with something.”

“That would be the icing on the cake for this trip,” I said, blinking tears from my eyes.

“Tell them you’ll do it,” Jean urged. “You owe it to poor Carolyn. That girl’s not going to rest until her killer is brought to justice, and it’ll be easier for you to investigate with some professional credibility behind you.”

Invoking Carolyn was a low blow. I’d learned enough about her for her to become real to me, a flesh-and-blood girl whose life had been cut short and whose killer had never been brought to justice—if she had, indeed, been murdered. “I guess I could do it,” I said. “But, as I told you, I haven’t edited a newspaper before, unless you count the high school paper.”

“Don’t worry,” Jean said. “I’ll help you with the editing. I’m still the real editor. You’re an assistant, just as you expected. You’re merely reporting to someone different than you thought.”

“You’ll do fine,” Lupe said. “And we know these aren’t ideal circumstances.”

“How much time do we have?” I asked.

“We go to press on Thursday night,” Evelyn said.

That gave me two days, counting today, to write two articles. I could write the ice storm piece in my sleep, but I wasn’t sure I could do much more than acknowledge Paul Ogden’s death, since his murder remained unsolved. Solving that crime, plus Carolyn’s death, and writing the story before Thursday night would be a tall order.

And then there was the tiny issue of me hallucinating the paper’s former editor. She was still there, watching this whole scene with great amusement. I forced myself not to look at her. “I’ll need access to the computer system.” To Wes, I added, “You didn’t have to take it for evidence?”

“We already got what we need,” he said.

“We’ll have Tami, our IT person, come by to get you set up,” Evelyn said.

I stepped over to the desk, opened the top drawer, found a notepad and pen, and took them out before turning to Wes. “Can you give me a briefing on the case of Paul Ogden’s death?”

“I think you know the basics.”

“I’d like to get the official version from you. I can’t quote myself in the newspaper.”

He rolled his eyes ever so slightly before saying in a totally deadpan tone, “A visitor discovered Paul Ogden’s body in the newspaper office Tuesday morning. The medical examiner’s preliminary finding is blunt-force trauma, but results of a full autopsy are pending. We can’t comment further on an active investigation, but if anyone has any information relating to the case, they can contact the police department.”

I left my pen hovering over the page, waiting for him to say more, but he just stared at me, straight-faced. “Okay. That was helpful,” I said, trying not to sound as snarky as I felt. “No arrests have been made?”

“No arrests have been made,” he confirmed with a smirk.

“Do you have any suspects?”

“Not that we can discuss publicly at this time.”

During this exchange, the board members watched us like they were spectators at a tennis match, turning their heads in unison back and forth as we spoke. “She’s good,” Lupe said with a grin.

“I’ll need to get a statement from you about Paul Ogden,” I said, turning to them.

“Paul Ogden distinguished his brief term as editor with a level of investigative reporting we hadn’t seen in Stirling Mills in years,” Evelyn said primly. “He will be missed. The newspaper foundation is offering a reward for information that leads to the arrest and conviction of the killer.”

“Do you have any other information about Paul Ogden? Did he have any family? Who are his survivors?”

The board members looked at each other. “I’m fairly certain he lived alone,” Patricia said.

“The next of kin we notified was an ex-wife in Fort Worth,” Wes said.

“I believe he had a grown daughter,” Lupe said, frowning.

“Maybe there’s something in the computer,” I said. Surely there would have been a bio of the new editor when he joined the paper, and newspapers generally kept prewritten obituaries of notable citizens ready to go. I wondered if he’d thought to include himself.

“Is that all you need from me?” Wes asked. He raised his phone and added, “I need to get that crime scene team over here.”

“I’ll need some information on the ice storm—statistics on accidents, injuries, and damage.”

“That information is at the office, so I’ll have to get back to you. After I deal with this crime scene.” With a sarcastic salute, he headed back to the press room.

The trio still stood in the middle of the office, watching me. I wanted to have words with the ghost, and I couldn’t do that with them there. “I guess I’d better get to work, then,” I said, taking a step forward to herd them toward the door.

“We won’t keep you,” Evelyn said, taking a step back as I entered her personal space. The others moved with her.

“We’ll let the IT person know you need access to the systems,” Patricia added. “And we’ll get the locksmith over here, as well.”

“Yes, that’ll be great,” I said, moving closer to the exit. Eventually, I got them out the door. Once they were all gone, I took a moment to collect myself before I turned to face the room again.

Jean was still there, perched on the corner of the desk and grinning. “You’re still here,” I said, keeping my voice low so Wes wouldn’t be able to hear me talking out loud to thin air from upstairs. “And I’m awake. I think.” I gave my upper arm a good pinch, just to be sure. It hurt.

“Yes, you’re awake. No, this isn’t a dream.”

“Then what is it?”

“You, my dear, have the ability to see and converse with the dead. Some might say you’re a medium, but that works somewhat differently. You don’t channel spirits. You interact with the dead who enter the plane of the living. In other words, ghosts. As I told you last night when you thought you were dreaming.”

“I’m not descended from any of those sideshow performers who came to this town. I’m not from around here at all.”

“You think they’re the only people in the world with special gifts? We do have a higher concentration here, but that doesn’t mean it doesn’t happen anywhere else.”

“Surely I’d have noticed that sort of thing before now.”

“It was obvious what you saw at that haunted restaurant.”

“That was just my imagination acting up. The power of suggestion. You go to a place hailed as being haunted and you see things.”

“That’s not what Arlene said.”

“Who’s Arlene?”

“The ghost in that restaurant. She knows I’m always looking for people I can work with, so she clued me in when she came across a

reporter she was pretty sure saw her, and your article matched what she said.”

I sank into the guest chair next to the editor’s desk and gave my arm another firm pinch.

“You’re awake, I told you. Did you ever have any imaginary friends?”

“What kid doesn’t?” I said with a laugh.

“What were yours like?”

“Well, there was one when I was really little, the first time we lived in England. We had an old cottage in a tiny village, and I guess I must have seen a picture in a book because my imaginary friend was a knight. He talked funny, and I didn’t understand him, but I knew he was watching over me.” I rubbed my hand over my face. “Oh, God, that was a ghost, wasn’t it? I mean, the whole point of an imaginary friend is having someone you can talk to when you’re feeling lonely. What would be the point of conjuring up a friend who speaks a different language? It was probably Middle English, so of course a little kid couldn’t understand it.”

“And it starts to sink in,” she said, shaking her head and sighing.

“There was a sad little girl who lived in my wardrobe the first time we lived in Germany, when I was a little younger than that. I’d climb in there and sit with her. Come to think of it, I couldn’t understand her, either.”

“I bet you also consider yourself to have good instincts. You have a knack for just finding crime scenes and other things that make for a good story.”

“Yeah, kind of,” I admitted. “They called me Lucky Lexie in the newsroom. You’re not telling me that’s because of ghosts, too, are you?”

“Do you ever feel like it’s a little voice in your head telling you where to look, and that’s when you stumble upon a good story?”

“Yeah, sometimes, I guess. But I know my beats, and I do have good instincts. You’re telling me it’s all ghosts tipping me off?”

“Maybe. But we don’t have time for you to figure out how much of your career you owe to the dead. You’ve got a gift. Accept what you are and move on. You’ve got work to do.”

How was I supposed to write articles and put together a newspaper when I’d just had my view of the universe turned upside down? I’d learned for certain that there was an afterlife and that people who’d died could still hang around with the living—and that I could talk to them. That was a lot to take in. “I need a moment here,” I said. I was feeling dizzy again.

“Pull yourself together, girl. I know you’re made of stronger stuff than that. Ghosts are real, you can see them. Get over it.”

Surprisingly, that worked. I’d had to report in all kinds of odd circumstances. I’d seen terrible things. And yet I’d done my job. I could freak out later. I blinked a few times and took a long, deep breath before saying, “I’ve got a list of suspects, based on who was in the area at the time of the murder, who might have had motive in the present, and who might have been linked to that graduation party.”

“Yes, Estelle told me you’d been in the library.”

“Estelle? You mean the librarian?” I remembered thinking she was right out of an old movie. What if she’d been from a different time? “She was a ghost?”

“She loved that library so much she stuck around. It was her idea of heaven, so she didn’t want to go anywhere else.”

I thought of another sighting. “And what about the woman who sits alone in the diner?”

“I think I know who you mean, but she’s from after my time, and she doesn’t chat much in the spirit realm.”

“Oh, boy,” I said, feeling lightheaded. “So I really do see dead people.”

“The dead people who want to be seen,” she corrected. “Not everyone does. Only some people stick around, tied either to where they died or to a place they feel connected to. But enough about this. You need to get to work. You’ve got a deadline, and I’m not

keen on having to hold the presses. I'll be back to go over where we want to slate which stories." She blinked out of sight, leaving only the slightest whiff of smoke, mixed with Chanel No. 5.

She was right. I had work to do that had nothing to do with spirits or superpowers. I forced myself to my feet and came around the desk. It took me a moment to steel myself to sit in the desk chair, but as soon as I was seated, I fell straight into work mode, forgetting all the ghost stuff for the moment. I looked up the media relations number for the power company and called to find out how many people had been without power in the storm, how much power had been restored, and when power would be fully restored. Then I called the Department of Public Safety media number to get a statement about the roads in this district and the number of reported accidents.

There wasn't much I could do beyond that, since I couldn't get on the computer and Wes hadn't made it back to the office to give me the local statistics about the ice storm. I found a blank legal pad in one of the drawers and began drafting my articles by hand. I finished the very unsatisfying article about Paul Ogden and came out of the writing zone to realize with a shudder that I was writing about a murder in the very spot where it had happened.

Ogden must have been sitting in this chair at this desk when the killer arrived. They'd probably had words, and the killer had shoved Ogden so hard that he hit his head on the table behind him and fell out of the chair. At least, that was my theory. I couldn't resist testing to see how the chair moved. I kicked off against the floor and found that the chair rolled easily. I walked it back to the desk and tried leaning back. It tilted a little too readily for my comfort, like the mechanism had been strained so it was too loose now. Was that because of what happened to Ogden, or had it been like that before? It wouldn't take too much leaning for the chair to tilt over.

I pretended that someone had given me a good shove and kicked off while I leaned back. I stopped myself before I hit the

table and turned to see that my head was right above the corner. Any additional force, and I would have hit it. It seemed my guess about how Ogden had died might be correct. He was probably taller than I was, so it might have taken a bit more force. I just had to hope his killer didn't return for me because it would be even easier to bash my head on the corner of that table.

I was startled out of that thought by the bells on the door jingling as it opened. I rolled the chair forward so that whoever was here wouldn't know that I'd figured out how Ogden was murdered.

Chapter Seventeen

It was a relief to see a green-haired teenage girl enter. I seriously doubted she was the killer. She was entirely the wrong size. “Hi! I’m Tami, your IT person. You must be the new editor,” she said.

“The interim editor. For one issue. I’m Lexie. Hi. I hope you can get me access to the computer.” I knew there were jokes about getting a kid to help you with technology, but I hadn’t expected that to be taken literally.

“Not a problem.” I got out of the chair to make way for her as she came around the desk. She paused, looking at the floor. “Is this where he, uh, you know . . .?”

“Yeah, over there.” I pointed to the spot.

She shuddered. “Ugh. You saw it?”

“The body. Not the killing.”

She sat in the desk chair, shrugged out of her coat, and turned the computer on. “You know how to work one of these?”

“I’ve been around a few,” I said dryly. How old did she think I was? “I just need the password, access to the e-mail account, that sort of thing.”

She typed some things, got to an admin panel, and said, “I’m adding you as a user.” She wrote something on my legal pad. “That’s your user ID and password. Lock that away somewhere if you have to keep a record to remind you. I hope it goes without saying that a sticky note with the password on the monitor is a bad idea.” She brought up the e-mail program and typed. “Now you’re

the owner of the editor e-mail account. I can set you up a personal one, too.”

“That won’t be necessary. I won’t be here that long. Did Ogden have a personal account?”

“Yeah. You can toggle it here. I gave you access, since he might have used it for stories he was working on.” She toggled it and leaned forward to look at the screen. “No death threats that I can see.” She clicked around, bringing up a file window. “Here’s the system I set up for organizing information. There are folders for each issue, with subfolders for stories in progress and edited stories. You decide what you want to go in the paper and where and fill out this form and send it to the designer for layout. Easy-peasy if you know what you’re doing.”

“That’s not too different from where I used to work. I should be able to manage it.” It occurred to me that she had actually worked with Ogden, so she was a good person to talk to. “What did you think about Paul Ogden?” I asked, trying to sound casual, like it was an offhand question.

She hesitated, worrying her lower lip with her teeth. “He wasn’t a bad guy, I guess. He just wasn’t very nice.”

“I’ve heard he wasn’t a people person.”

“Yeah, that about sums it up. It took him forever to respect me at all. I know he complained about me to the board, but they were the ones who brought me on. I liked Miss Lily a lot better.”

“You worked for the previous editor, too?” She couldn’t have been more than seventeen, and Ogden had been editor for several years.

“My older sister did, but I helped out and took over a couple of years ago when she went to college.” I must have looked surprised because she explained, “Actually, our dad used to do tech support for the paper. My great-grandmother is on the board. But one day he couldn’t break away from his real job to do something, so he sent my sister, and Miss Lily liked her much better, so he was fired and my sister was hired. You don’t have a problem with me, do

you?” She tossed her green hair defiantly.

“Not as long as you know your stuff.”

“Mr. Ogden didn’t even give me that chance. He’d have flipped at the way I look today.”

“I guess green hair wasn’t his thing.”

“To be honest, it’s not mine, either. But I didn’t have school today and I was bored. I wanted to see what it would look like. It’s temporary. It’s supposed to wash out. I hope.”

“Do you know of anything he was working on that might have led to someone wanting to kill him?”

“I didn’t spend that much time around him. Only to set things up, and then when he had computer problems, which wasn’t often. At least he wasn’t technologically illiterate. So, it was definitely murder?” The eager look in her eyes was a little unsettling.

“That’s what the cops seem to think.”

“There was something he was looking into, a really old case. I remember because I thought it would be good podcast fodder. I have a regional true crime podcast. Well, I’ve only had a couple of episodes because we don’t have a lot of crime, but it looks like I’ll have material for more. Anyway, some girl a long time ago went missing on graduation night, and they found her a few days later. They called it an accident, but it was fishy.”

“Do you know what made him dig it up?”

“Not sure. He just had the article about it out one day when I came in to do a system update. He said he was investigating it, and I thought it sounded interesting.”

“Have you learned anything about that case?”

“I haven’t really started working on it yet.”

Since she was a high school student, I had a feeling she’d know about Danny Jefferson, but I wondered if it would be appropriate to mention that case to her. I knew I’d need to tread delicately. “I found a story about a teacher who’d been accused of an impropriety.”

“Mr. Jefferson, yeah. It was totally bogus. We all knew that.

Everyone in the class heard Celeste Hargety tell him she'd get him in trouble unless he changed her grade. That really pisses me off because it means that if a teacher ever does creep on a student, it'll be harder for us to get anyone to believe us after she lied. I guess she thought that tipping off the paper instead of officially reporting it made it different. I tried to tell Mr. Ogden what happened, but he said he was obligated to investigate it. I think he just thought it was a good, juicy story. He was always looking for the big scoop that would get him enough attention to get him out of here, like if he got the story of the century, he could get a job at a real newspaper." She got out of the chair and put her coat on. "Need anything else?"

"I should be fine. Thanks," I said. As soon as she was gone, I went to work. I had a paper to put out and not a lot of time. I created a new document on the computer and began typing, transcribing what I'd already written about Ogden. Unless someone made a major break in the next twenty four hours, that story would probably remain annoyingly open-ended. All I could report was that he was dead and the investigation was in progress. I filled out the story with the vague statement from the board. It didn't sound like I'd get a lot of good quotes about how missed he'd be even if I interviewed half the town, so I suspected no one reading the paper would be surprised when the article didn't come across like a tribute. Maybe there'd be room for that sort of thing in a follow-up article, like when someone was arrested for the murder.

I found a headshot of Ogden on file. He looked almost exactly like I'd pictured him, with beady eyes, thinning hair, and a brushy mustache. I felt a little bit guilty for being glad I'd never had to work for him. Would I have taken the job if murder hadn't interrupted the interview, or would I have had bad vibes from him and declined the offer? It was hard to tell. My main misgiving about the job now was the murder. Well, that and the pushy ghost who thought she was still running the show. I'd had strange bosses before, but they'd all been alive.

As though the thought had summoned her, the stench of smoke heralded Jean's arrival. "How's it going?" she asked as she perched on the corner of the desk. She took a long inhale from her cigarette and blew out a stream of smoke.

I waved the spectral smoke away from my face. "Do you have to do that?"

"Honey, it's already killed me. And I don't think it can hurt you. It's not real smoke."

"But it smells terrible and it makes my eyes burn, so it's doing something."

She held the cigarette and its holder out in front of her, frowning at it. "Really?"

"Yes. That's how I know you're here, even before I see you."

"Huh." She tossed the cigarette over her shoulder, where it vanished, along with the scent of smoke. "Now, how are you doing? What's this issue looking like?"

I pulled up the file of stories that had already been written and let her read over my shoulder. I had ideas for how the paper should go, but I suspected Jean would have her own opinions. "There's no follow-up on that teacher story," she remarked.

"Tami said it was a bogus accusation, but Danny Jefferson is apparently still suspended. And he was seen near here on the morning of the murder."

"Sounds like something you need to dig into." Those two easy stories had now become three. "I'm thinking the murder, the ice storm, and the teacher to start on the front page, the murder above the fold. We can jump them all to the interior. Too bad you didn't take a picture of the crime scene, since you were here."

"You think I should have taken a picture of the body?" I asked, aghast.

"No, we wouldn't have run that. But you could have taken a picture of the front of the newspaper office with crime scene tape around it."

"I wasn't on the newspaper staff at the time," I pointed out,

“and it wasn’t exactly a moment in my life I wanted to commemorate. I found a headshot of Ogden to run with the article. That seems more respectful.”

She snorted. “But not very exciting. We don’t get that much real news around here, so when it happens literally at our doorstep, it’s a pity we don’t have anything good.”

“Well, forgive me for not thinking about a newspaper I didn’t work for when I stumbled upon a crime scene. Maybe I should have taken a picture or two of my underwear scattered around the floor upstairs to go with an article about someone ransacking the apartment.”

“Now you’re thinking!” she said.

“Wow, you must have been a ghoul even before you died,” I said, just as the door opened and a man carrying a toolbox entered. I wondered how much he’d heard and made a show of tapping the face of my phone so that it looked like I was ending a call. “Hi, how can I help you?” I said.

“I’m the locksmith, here to change out all the locks.”

“Oh, good.” I was surprised he’d made it here on a day like today. I hadn’t heard anyone drive up, so he must have walked. “Well, there you go,” I said, gesturing to the front door. “And there’s also the upstairs apartment.”

He nodded and went to work. To my dismay, Jean didn’t let his presence bother her. She went back to leaning over my shoulder and asking me to open articles for her to review. As she read, she made comments and corrections. Since I couldn’t talk to a ghost with someone else in the room, I couldn’t argue with her. I didn’t entirely disagree with anything, so I went ahead with the corrections. I wondered what she’d do if I went against her. What power did she really have? The most I’d seen her able to do was blow smoke in my face and waft a piece of paper around. I supposed she could annoy me a great deal and make me look foolish in front of others. It’s funny how many horror stories there are about ghosts, and it turns out that they’re mostly powerless.

My phone rang, and though I didn't recognize the number, it was local to Stirling Mills, so I answered it. "Hi, Lexie, it's Wes Mosby," his voice said in my ear. I hadn't noticed what a nice voice he had, rich and deep. I wondered if he sang.

I jolted myself out of the strange little reverie to say, "Hi. The locksmith is here. He's working on the front door, and then I guess there are a few other locks downstairs before I send him up to the apartment."

"I'll let my people know. They should be up there now. But I was calling to give you that information you asked for about the storm."

"Oh, okay, thanks."

"You ready?"

I picked up my pen and grabbed the nearby notepad. "Yeah. Shoot."

"Twelve automobile accidents. Five of those were single-vehicle. Two people from those accidents had to be transported to the hospital by ambulance. We rescued twenty stranded motorists when highways became nearly impassable. Our local churches did an excellent job of giving those people shelter. As of now, all of those people are still here because the roads where their vehicles were abandoned are still at a standstill."

I jotted all that down and read the numbers back to him to verify. "Anything else?"

"That's about it."

"You haven't arrested Ogden's killer since we last spoke?"

He chuckled softly. "No, sorry."

"No smoking gun of evidence in the apartment?"

"The crime scene team hasn't had a chance to process anything up there."

"So I guess the killer didn't oblige us by carelessly dropping his business card while he searched the apartment."

"Alas, no."

I sighed. "Oh, well. But you will keep me posted?"

“Don’t worry. You’ll be one of the first to know.”

I was still smiling as I ended the call. “Stop flirting and get back to work,” Jean said.

I started to respond, then remembered the locksmith was still there and bit my tongue. Jean finished giving me her input on the articles and their order of importance, then I opened a new file and dashed off a quick article on the ice storm.

The locksmith finished with the front door and moved on to the door to the press room. Jean quit reading over my shoulder as I wrote and went to supervise his work, cautioning him about scratching the finish on the door. He didn’t seem to hear her, but I was glad to get her away from me. Her presence made me twitchy. Part of my mind refused to believe she was real. At the same time, the revelation about ghosts explained so much in my life. I knew I’d need to process it all later, but while things were still nuts, I didn’t think I’d come to any satisfying conclusions.

I didn’t know if there was an official photographer on staff, so I went outside to take a picture of the icy Main Street and sent it to the editor’s e-mail account. That way Jean couldn’t complain about me missing something. She must have decided her work was finished because she was gone by the time I came back to the office, and the locksmith had moved upstairs.

Now that I could work without Jean’s interference, I went back through the articles that had already been written and gave them one last look, moving them into the file for layout as I finished each one. By this time, it was growing darker outside and I was getting hungry. Mexican food two nights in a row probably wasn’t good for me, but Margarita’s was the closest place, and I liked it. I locked the office with the new key the locksmith left me and headed across the street.

The restaurant was a little more crowded this evening—at least, a couple of the booths were full. Wes was already sitting at the bar. I took the stool next to him. “We’ve got to stop meeting like this,” I quipped.

“Actually, I prefer meeting like this to emergency calls being involved,” he said, raising a glass of iced tea at me, like he was making a toast. He was in uniform, so I supposed there would be no margaritas for him.

“Hey, welcome back,” Margarita said as she came out of the kitchen and saw me. She placed a sizzling plate in front of Wes. “I hear you’re taking the editor’s job.”

“Interim only. I’m just finishing out the next issue while I’m stuck here. Does this town even need a newspaper? It seems like everyone knows everything within about five minutes of it happening.”

“The paper serves as a public record of what everyone already knows,” Wes said.

“The stuff we want a record of,” Margarita corrected. “There’s a whole lot everyone knows that doesn’t make it in the paper. What can I get you to drink?”

“Just water tonight.” She nodded and headed for the kitchen.

The door opened, and Jordan entered, escorting Ruthie, who was walking on prosthetic legs. Fitz trotted alongside her. “Thanks for the lift,” she told Jordan. “I’m not sure how good my footing would be on ice, and I was starting to go stir-crazy, cooped up in there.”

“Glad to help, and I needed to charge up the Tesla here, anyway,” he said with a shrug.

They sat at the far end of the bar, and I felt Wes stiffen next to me. If he’d been a dog, the hair on his back would have stood straight up. “I’m guessing there’s one of those unwritten stories going on here,” I said, keeping my voice low enough that it wouldn’t travel beyond us.

“Not really,” he replied, just as softly. “It’s personal. Not something that needs to be written.”

Before I could ask a follow-up question, Margarita returned with a basket of chips and a glass of water for me. “I’m afraid our menu is somewhat limited tonight because we didn’t get our usual

shipments in,” she said. “No beef fajitas, no sour cream chicken enchiladas, and no tamales. We’re also just about out of lettuce and tomatoes, so the tacos will be kind of naked. I only have a few avocados left, so we’re running low on guacamole. I’m lucky there were some that needed ripening in the last shipment.”

I ordered cheese enchiladas and turned to Wes when she moved over to take Jordan and Ruthie’s orders. “Nothing relevant to any current cases?”

He shook his head. “Why would you even think so?”

“He might have the tech know-how to wipe my GPS, which delayed the confirmation of my alibi.”

“So does my teenage cousin, and I don’t think she murdered Ogden. Come to think of it, she probably has more motive than Jordan, since she had to actually deal with him.”

“Tami is your cousin?”

“Actually, my cousin’s kid, so she’s either once-removed or a second cousin, or however that goes.”

“Evelyn is your grandmother?”

“Just about everyone in town is connected in some way. I think that’s why genealogy is so popular around here. You have to do a full family tree before you know it’s safe to date someone.”

The door opened again, and a man entered, looking wary, like he thought he was stepping into a room full of enemies. There was something vaguely familiar about him, though I was sure I hadn’t met him in my two days in town. I must have seen him in the yearbook. I barely managed not to gasp aloud when I realized it was Danny Jefferson. He’d grown a beard and his hairline had receded a little, but he still looked a lot like he had as a teen. “Danny! Come on in,” Margarita said. “Have a seat.”

He glanced around before climbing onto the stool next to me. “Have you met Lexie?” Margarita said. “She’s taking over the newspaper.”

“I’m doing one issue,” I corrected. “Hi, nice to meet you,” I said to Danny. This was a perfect example of my luck. A suspect in two

of the cases I was investigating who might also be a good source for a news story just happened to come into the restaurant where I was eating dinner and take the seat next to me. I didn't think ghosts had anything to do with that, no matter what Jean thought.

"This is Danny. He's a teacher at the school," Margarita said.

"I used to be," he muttered.

"Still on suspension?" she asked.

"Hard to say, since it was a snow day and they've already closed school for tomorrow."

"But I thought you were cleared?"

He glanced at me before looking back at Margarita. "There are . . . other issues."

"Don't worry, I'm not planning on writing anything," I said. "I know Paul Ogden stirred some things up."

"I didn't kill him, if that's what you're getting at. If I were going to kill anyone, it wouldn't be him."

Chapter Eighteen

“**T**here is someone you’d kill?” Wes asked, leaning over and raising an eyebrow.

“Only figuratively, as you’d well know,” Danny replied. To me, he added, “Ogden handled it well. It was the principal and superintendent who blew it out of proportion to the point that the whole community knew I was the one accused, and now they have parents who don’t want their kids in my classes even though there’s video evidence showing I never touched a kid. Ogden said he’d do a follow-up about the video, but I guess that’s not going to happen—and that shows that I didn’t have a motive for the murder. I wouldn’t kill the guy who could have helped clean up my reputation.”

“There was video?” I asked.

“I set up security cameras in my classroom at the beginning of the school year. I had a friend who got accused of improper conduct with a student last year, so I wanted to protect myself. And good thing, too. A student threatened to accuse me if I didn’t change her grade. I guess she went to the newspaper instead of to the administration, and Ogden called the principal about it. When the principal called me in, I was able to show footage proving her threat and that nothing happened. There was never a time when I was alone with a student in the classroom.”

“Shouldn’t that have been the end of it?”

“Well, they suspended me for the investigation before they even

called me in to get my side of the story because it's not safe to leave a suspected molester with kids, and the community was able to put two and two together between the article and my suspension to know it was me. Then the parents got all up in arms because they only knew about the accusation, not that I was cleared, so the administration is keeping me on suspension. It's been loads of fun." His tone was bitterly sarcastic.

"I could do a follow-up. I still have time to get it in the next issue. Do you want to be quoted, or do you want your name out of it?"

"Everyone knows I was the teacher accused, so I might as well be open. We can't name the kid, since I have no absolute proof of who tipped off Ogden, and she's a minor."

"I'll call the administration tomorrow, but I may have some more questions for you."

He gave me his number, and I added it to the contacts on my phone. On a whim, I said, "This is going to sound like a weird question, but did you go to your high school graduation party?"

"You must have heard about the Carolyn Stevens case."

"How did you know?"

"Why else would anyone care what happened at a high school graduation party that long ago? And Ogden asked me the same thing when he talked to me about the school incident."

"He did?"

"Yeah. I did go, just for a little while. Carolyn and I dared each other to go, since neither of us had gone to a party throughout high school. We figured we'd shock everyone when we showed up." He shook his head sadly. "I've regretted that ever since. If I hadn't goaded her into going to that party, she'd still be alive."

"Or she'd have gone off the road on her way home from the library," Margarita, who must have overheard, put in. "Trust me, fate has a funny way of working out the way it's supposed to. What can I get you, Danny?"

I waited impatiently while he placed his order, then when

Margarita headed to the kitchen, I said, “You and Carolyn went together?”

“No. Another thing I regret. We came in separate cars. I got there a lot earlier than she did, and she barely got there before she left. She stood in the doorway for a few seconds before turning to go. I thought about going after her to make sure she was okay, but I was actually having fun with a few of my friends, so I didn’t get around to it. Add that to my list of regrets.”

“Do you remember who else was at the party?”

He shrugged. “Most of the class. Even a lot of the outcasts showed up. We really weren’t that cliquey. There were the usual social hierarchies, with the jocks and cheerleaders at the top and various levels below, but I think we’re all well aware that we’re a town full of freaks. Believe it or not, we didn’t have a lot of bullying. The outcasts tended to be those who weren’t very social. They weren’t picked on that much, just ignored. The jock crowd was definitely the center of the party, and some of their friends from earlier classes were there, too. You know, the ones who peaked in high school and keep coming back.” With a sigh, he shook his head. “Actually, that’s not true. You can’t say that someone who made it to the NFL, who’s running for Congress, who starred in a TV show, or who’s built a real estate empire peaked in high school.”

“They were all at the party?”

He frowned, thinking. “The others were, but I don’t remember seeing Clark. He usually ran with that crowd, and I’m pretty sure he was in town then, but if he was at the party, I didn’t see him. That bunch really isn’t good for the ego.” His shoulders sagged, and he looked like he was folding in on himself. “I used to tell myself that they could rule the school, but that would be the highlight of their lives, while I was going to go places. But they all went on to even better things while I’m still at the school, barely making ends meet.”

“Teaching’s a lot more valuable to society than playing football,

selling houses, or even being in Congress,” I said. “Congress may be important, but I’m not sure they actually add value.”

“Yeah, but value doesn’t pay the bills. Funny, the things that do actually add value, that we need for society to function, don’t pay nearly as well as all those more frivolous things.”

“Yeah, speaking as a reporter—recently unemployed—I get it.”

“Try being a cop,” Wes added, leaning over to join the conversation. “And I was in his”—he made a subtle gesture toward Jordan—“class. Making a game you play on your phone can bring in billions.”

I knew it was more than just the one game, but I didn’t think he’d take well to being corrected. I assumed Clark Keaton was the one running for Congress. I was curious who the football pro and TV star in the class were. That opened the pool of suspects wider. I also wondered who else Ogden had talked to about the Carolyn Stevens case.

“I thought you two were friends,” Danny said to Wes.

“We were. Now we’re not. And it has nothing to do with his money. We were already on the outs before graduation.”

Danny said, “I didn’t—” but cut himself off, shaking his head. “Oh yeah, sorry.”

Wes caught Margarita after she came back from refilling glasses at the other end of the bar and said, “If I could just get the check. I need to get back to the office. And last night’s check, too.”

“Last night’s was already paid.”

“Last night’s check, too,” he repeated, more forcefully.

“It won’t put the money back in his pocket.”

He set down a couple of bills that had to have been worth double what his meal cost and left before she could even bring the bill.

She shook her head. “I just want to bang their heads together sometimes.”

“What happened?”

“I’m not entirely sure. Wes thinks Jordan betrayed him, but I

don't know the details because he won't talk about it. I only know he's still holding a grudge, and it got worse when Jordan sailed back into town with all his money."

Danny shrugged. "It was after my time. I only know they were inseparable as freshmen."

My food arrived, and I mulled it all over as I ate. If there were some current big shots who'd been at the party, then there would be people with a motive to keep Ogden quiet about whatever happened to Carolyn. The question was, were any of them other than Keaton still in town? Then there was what Danny had said about a town full of freaks. Did all of this go back to that stranded sideshow?

Danny wolfed down his dinner and left, and Jordan escorted Ruthie out. The other diners left, too. Soon, it was just me with Margarita. I hoped she wasn't eager to close because I wasn't keen on going back to the apartment. I didn't want to get grilled by a ghost about what I'd been up to, and even though the locks had been changed, I was nervous about being there alone. She brought me a margarita and said, "I bet you could use this."

"Oh yeah. It's been an interesting couple of days."

She leaned on the bar. "Aren't you at least a little tempted to take the job and stay?"

"It hasn't actually been offered to me. I know there was an offer in writing—which made me a murder suspect for a while—but the board asked me to do just this issue. I think I'm being tested. Come to think of it, we didn't even discuss pay for the work I'm doing."

"Don't worry, they'll be fair. And I'm pretty sure they'll make you an offer."

"If they aren't worried about me having the shadow of suspicion hanging over me."

"Believe it or not, that hasn't made its way around town. Wes was good about keeping it reasonably quiet."

"In the town where everyone knows everything the moment it happens? I've already been accused pretty publicly in the middle of

the diner.”

She winced. “Oh, yeah, there’s probably no such thing as keeping things quiet around here. But once they catch the killer, it won’t matter that you were ever a suspect. They’ll know you didn’t kill him to steal his job.”

“I don’t know that I want the job. I’m not sure it’s a good fit for me. I’m a reporter, not an editor. I’ve never wanted to run a newspaper. I’m also not a roots person. It sounds like what the town wants is someone who’ll stick around for life and become part of the community. That’s just not me. I get itchy every three years and have to change jobs or move. I once moved across the street because I couldn’t stand staying in the same place any longer, even though I liked where I was. And I’m not the small-town type.”

“You need the bright lights and excitement of the big city? Nightlife, and all that?”

“Well, no,” I admitted. “I’m not much for nightlife. Old movies and good books are more my speed. But I can’t imagine living in the kind of town where you have to compare your family trees before you’re sure it’s safe to date someone.” Well, I could imagine it. I had. The hard part would be being an outsider in that kind of town, as I was starting to see.

“You wouldn’t have to worry about that, since you’re not related to anyone here. You’d be quite popular. And you’d be surprised how many young, single people we have around here.”

“Because it’s hard to find someone to marry that you’re not related to?”

“Because the town really is being revitalized. Jordan’s opening a new tech firm, and that’s drawing a lot of new people.”

“So, not everyone in town has roots that go back generations? I’m used to being the new kid in town, but I’m also used to the next new kid in town coming along a month or so later. It’s really hard to fit in when everyone else has known each other forever.”

“I’ll admit, it used to be that way. More than half my

graduating class had been together since kindergarten. But it really has changed with Jordan's tech stuff coming in. Then there's the arts community, which is also bringing in new people. We have arts, a movie theater, a bookstore, and good food. What more could you want?"

"Well, when you put it that way . . ." Actually, I wasn't sure what I wanted. This was exactly the kind of place I'd dreamed of, but now that it was a real possibility, it scared me. "I think it would help to see it when it's not covered in ice and when I'm not being suspected of murder."

"We're a pretty welcoming place. This isn't one of those small towns where we consider people who haven't been here at least a century to be outsiders and newcomers. This is the town that welcomed a sideshow." She gestured over her shoulder at the picture hanging on the wall behind her.

I tried not to grin. She'd given me the perfect opening to ask about that. "Tell me more about this sideshow. I'm curious."

Her face became grim. "You're not going to write about it, are you?"

"No. I'm just trying to figure out how the town works."

"Okay. But we really don't want to publicize this. Yeah, we're proud of our heritage, but we don't want the world thinking this is a town of freaks." She took the picture off the wall and set it down on the bar. I recognized Jean standing in the middle of the group posed in front of the train car. "That's your predecessor, Jean Jacobs. She had a lot to do with the town accepting the newcomers. Whatever Jean wanted, Jean got, from the sound of things. Her father was the wealthiest man in town. She wanted to be a reporter, but no newspapers would take her seriously, so her father bought the local paper for her to run. A few articles and a strongly worded editorial, and she paved the way for them to settle in town." She pointed to the woman to Jean's right. "My great-great-grandmother, the fortune-teller. Then this woman was a mind reader, and this one was a medium. The guy in the turban

was a hypnotist.” She pointed to a burly man holding a smaller man over his head. “The strong man, obviously. And that’s the electro man.”

“For real?”

She gave a laugh that sounded slightly forced. “Depends on what you consider ‘real.’ The strong man really was stronger than the average man, but I suspect his weights weren’t entirely accurately labeled. The acrobats really were agile. As for fortune-telling and mind reading . . .” She shrugged. “I don’t know. I’m sure there was a bit of showmanship going on, like there always is with that kind of thing. You don’t think stage magicians are actually cutting women in two, do you?”

“Well, no. What about that electro man?” That was interesting, considering that the electrical system in my car had gone wonky. It said a lot about the past couple of days that I was seriously considering the idea that someone with electrical superpowers had fried my car.

“He channeled electricity. Supposedly, his show was pretty impressive, but they were also dealing with an audience who mostly didn’t yet have electricity in their homes, so a lightbulb on its own would have been worth the price of admission.” I noticed that she didn’t quite look me in the eye as she spoke. Now that I’d talked to an actual ghost, I had a feeling there was more to these powers than Margarita was willing to share with an outsider.

I tried to think of a way to ask the names of the original sideshow people, but it would have sounded like I was planning to write a story about them or track down their descendants. Okay, maybe I was going to track down descendants. I wanted to find out who in this town could stall my car’s electrical system with a touch or by walking by it. Or did someone kill Paul Ogden because they read his mind and knew what he was planning to write?

Looking at the photo once more, it occurred to me that I could ask Jean. She might not know who the descendants were, but she could definitely tell me who the original people were, and that

might give me a starting point.

"This is all really interesting," I told Margarita. "I think that influx of unusual outsiders must have shaped the character of the town."

"I wouldn't recommend that you go to work in just any small town, but this one might be good for you."

"I'd have to take up an exercise program if I made a habit of eating here."

"I tried to start a diet menu, but nobody was interested." She took my empty plate to the kitchen and returned. "I noticed you were talking to Danny about Carolyn Stevens. How did you hear about that? You talk about us knowing everything within minutes, but you've been in town a couple of days and you already know about one of our greatest unsolved mysteries."

"I found a copy of an article about it in a box of stuff Ogden left in the apartment." While I spoke, the door opened, bringing in a blast of cold air.

"You think it had something to do with his murder?"

"I don't know. Mostly, I was curious. I don't like stories without endings, and that one seemed rather unsettled."

The new arrival turned out to be Felicity. "I had a take-out order," she said.

Margarita called back to the kitchen, and the cook placed a paper sack on the pass-through ledge. "Here you go," she said, handing it to Felicity. "Do you need cutlery?"

"No, we're pretty well set up in the office."

"He has you working awfully late," I remarked.

She made a face I couldn't quite interpret. "Yeah, well, we weren't planning to be stuck here so long, but while we are, we might as well get some work done. This is a critical stage of the campaign. We might get to breathe a bit after the primary."

She turned to go, and Margarita and I resumed our conversation. "I was still in junior high when it happened, so I'm afraid there's not much I can tell you," she said. "I was aware it

had happened, since it was a big deal at that time, but I didn't know her at all. I mostly remember people being leery of letting their daughters drive alone at night, since we didn't know if she'd been murdered or if she'd just driven off the road."

I shivered as Felicity opened and closed the door. "Do you recall whether people thought it was murder or an accident?"

"Opinion was divided, I think. She was a really level-headed girl, so it seemed unlikely that she'd been driving recklessly, and it didn't look like anyone had run her off the road—no skid marks on the road, no signs of her car having been hit by another car. Then there were those who didn't want it to be murder because they couldn't imagine that sort of thing happening in a town like this. They thought she might have been upset or tired, and that was why she wrecked." She shrugged. "That's about all I know. Wes's dad worked the case. Wes might know more."

"He had some pretty strong opinions when I told him about finding the article, but not so much about the case. He was angry on her behalf because the way people talked about her after she died was so different from the way they'd treated her when she was alive."

"That sounds like Wes," she said with a chuckle.

"You've known him long?"

"My whole life. He's a couple years older, so we didn't really hang out, but it's a small town, and he was the school brain and in a lot of activities, so I knew a lot about him." She bowed her head and let her hair fall over her face, shielding her. "I will confess that there was a time in high school when I had a tiny crush on him. I made a bit of a fool out of myself whenever he was around, so I'm sure he knew, though he might not have believed it. Girls didn't pay a lot of attention to him."

"I saw his freshman yearbook. He was nerdy, maybe, but he was still pretty cute."

"But very shy. He mostly avoided people."

"And the school brain? Not Jordan?"

“They were both up there, in close competition for top of the class. Jordan was a whiz in math and science, merely good in everything else. Wes was more well-rounded, fairly high in every subject, but not quite as good in math and science as Jordan.”

“I wonder if that’s why Wes hates Jordan.”

“Who knows? I’m not sure Wes even really remembers why. He just can’t let it go.” She gave me a sly grin. “He’s single, by the way. No wife, no girlfriend.”

I may have found him attractive, but I hadn’t even begun to think along those lines. I felt my face grow warm. I wasn’t sure what to say, since any denial combined with my blush would only be incriminating. “You haven’t dated him? Or are you related?”

“No relation. I figured out after I got over the crush that we aren’t all that compatible.”

“Long-distance relationships are challenging, so I’ll have to leave him for someone else.”

It was getting late, and I was sure Margarita wanted to close the place and head home, so I paid my check and left. The downtown area was deserted. I didn’t see many signs of life, just a few softly glowing windows with lights behind them. The footing was treacherous, since that afternoon’s melt had refrozen after the temperatures dropped at sunset. I half slid, half walked across the street and was about to head down the side street that would take me to the apartment’s rear entrance when I thought I saw something move in the shadows.

Chapter Nineteen

I didn't think I was being entirely paranoid to not want to walk down a dark side street or alley when someone might be lurking there. I knew there was a murderer on the loose, and if Ogden was killed because of something he'd discovered about the Carolyn Stevens case, there was a chance the killer thought I had access to the same information. The apartment where I was staying had been searched. What if the killer went directly after me?

I thought for a moment about calling Wes, but I didn't know for certain that I was being followed, and I'd feel like an idiot if he showed up and found that I was being stalked by a stray plastic grocery bag. Besides, I'd have to wait for Wes or one of the other cops to reach me. Even as close as I was to the police station, the killer would have plenty of time to get to me before the cops could get there, and me calling the police might spur the killer to act.

I figured I was a lot safer staying on Main Street. Not that it was any more crowded than the side street, but it was better lit, with fewer shadows, and there were windows overlooking it. This seemed like the kind of town where people might come to the rescue of someone screaming on Main Street.

I stayed on this side of the street until I reached Ruthie's studio. The lights were on in there, and she was sitting at her easel in the window, her dog lying at her feet. She looked up and saw me, and I gave her a friendly wave. That made me feel a little better. There was a witness, and I hoped the person following me—if there was

one—realized that. There wasn't anyone lurking around the newspaper office, so I hurried across the street, slipping a little on the ice in my haste. I felt a lot better when I was inside and had locked the door behind me. Someone who was really determined could probably break the windows and get to me, but I doubted that anyone who lurked in the shadows would do something that bold. If he hadn't grabbed me on Main Street, he wasn't going to break windows.

Passing the desk and computer made me pause to think. I'd more or less ruled Danny Jefferson out as a suspect because he needed Ogden to write the follow-up story. But I hadn't found a follow-up story on the computer. If Ogden had been planning to write one, he hadn't even created a file. Granted, Ogden had died several days before the deadline, so he might not have started it yet even if he'd planned to. But if Ogden had refused the follow-up, Danny might have become angry enough to push him. And now he knew that I was also looking into the Carolyn Stevens case.

Then again, he was relying on me to write the follow-up, so why would he stalk me? He wouldn't have any reason to want to waylay me or make me feel threatened. Even if he'd also been involved in Carolyn's death, it was in his best interest for me to write the story about him being cleared and then leave town, forgetting about Carolyn. Anything that made me feel like I was on the right track would be a really bad idea.

Unless I really was on the right track and the killer had a lot to lose if I figured things out—and was willing to take drastic measures to stop me.

I headed up to the apartment, using the stairs in the press room, and paused in the doorway after turning on the lights. I didn't hear any movement. The crime scene team had tidied up after doing their work, which was nice of them, though it was a little unsettling knowing they'd gone through my belongings. Once I was certain that I was alone, I locked the door from the inside and crossed the room to throw the interior deadbolt on the other

door.

If Danny Jefferson wasn't my prime suspect, I had to go back to some of my other theories, and for that I needed more input. Feeling rather silly, I called out to the empty space, "Jean?" Was she always there, watching and listening, or did she only come at certain times? If I ended up with this job and living in this apartment, I'd need to set some ground rules, and possibly avoid bringing anyone back to my place if I did prove popular with those who wanted to avoid dating relatives. Or were ghosts there all the time, observing us in everything we did, and only people like me were aware of them? When I got no response, I added, "I need you to tell me about the electro man."

She appeared, lounging on the sofa in silk pajamas. "You've got a theory?"

"Someone wiped my car's electrical system—temporarily, just long enough to erase my GPS." I realized that she'd died long before that was a thing. "The mapping system that shows where I've been. Because of that, the police weren't able to tell where I was and when, so they couldn't easily prove that I wasn't here in time to kill Paul Ogden."

"So, that gift is finally good for more than turning on light bulbs. That was pretty impressive back in the day."

"Now everything's electronic. Someone with that power could cause a lot of disruption. Do you remember the original electro man's name?"

"Ferdinand Jaslow. Nice fella, but don't let him touch your watch."

I hadn't met anyone with that last name, but he could have had daughters, or his sons could have had daughters. A lot of time had passed since the thirties. I had no way of knowing if any of the few people I'd met were descended from him. "Do you know who some of his descendants might be?"

"I've been dead for nearly forty years. Any names I have won't be much help. You know, since you've got your own gift, maybe

you should go out to the scene of the accident and talk to the girl yourself. I'm pretty sure she lurks around there. She definitely hasn't moved on."

"Everything's covered in ice, and my car's in the shop."

"Ice? Really?"

"You had comments about my article on the ice storm."

"Oh. Right. When is it now?"

"February. You don't keep up with that sort of thing?"

"I'm dead. It's all the same to me. How's the paper coming?"

"I've got one more article to write, then it's off to layout."

She nodded. "Good. Now, go get some rest so you can get to work in the morning." She blinked away before I could ask her any other questions.

THE NEXT MORNING as I made my way down the stairs to the office, I had to admit that the commute couldn't be beat. I was at work in seconds, with no traffic. If I'd had to drive, I wouldn't have gone anywhere. As Wes had predicted, yesterday's slight melt had refrozen into a sheet of ice that was even slicker than the previous day's sleet accumulation. There was no traffic at all on Main Street, not even police cars.

That meant school was still out. I tried calling the superintendent's office, but got only voice mail telling me that the school district was closed. Ogden had the superintendent's and principal's home numbers in his Rolodex, so I called the superintendent and asked him about Danny Jefferson. He gave me a noncommittal comment about investigating fully.

"My understanding is that there's video evidence that Mr. Jefferson had no physical contact with any student and was never alone with a student, and I have witnesses saying that a student threatened to get him in trouble if he wouldn't change her grade. What further investigation do you plan to do?" I said in my best

“confronting politicians” voice.

“Parents expect us to be careful,” he said.

“What, exactly, is your concern?”

“Well, uh . . .”

“Was there something on the video that concerned you?”

“No, nothing happened. Mr. Jefferson was never alone with a student in the video we reviewed.”

“Do you think that something else happened at your school that isn’t reflected in the video?”

“No!” The shock in his voice suggested he hadn’t considered how people might interpret his inaction.

“Then can you tell me why Mr. Jefferson is still suspended?”

“We’re planning to close the investigation and reinstate Mr. Jefferson when the schools open again following the storm. You can quote me.”

“Thank you.”

I hung up and spun around in my desk chair with a squeal of glee. I loved this sort of thing, getting justice by shedding light on things. I wouldn’t have thought there’d be much call for that with a small-town paper, but maybe there was even more potential.

“Nice work,” Jean said. I jumped and stifled a squeak of surprise. When she wasn’t smoking, there wasn’t anything to warn me of her presence. Today she was dressed in a Katharine Hepburn-style pantsuit with wide-legged trousers. “That’s what this job is all about, not allowing those in power to operate in darkness. I see that you get that.”

“That’s why I became a reporter.”

“Well, get to work on that article. We’ve got to get to press.”

That would have been easier without a ghost leaning over my shoulder, editing me as I worked. I wrote the article to Jean’s satisfaction, gave it a good once-over, and notified the designer that the paper was ready for layout. I assumed she had the ads. Did they have an ad sales staff? The editorial side wasn’t supposed to have anything to do with advertising, but I’d never seen it so

separate that the ad sales team wasn't even in the building. I'd have to ask how all this worked.

Or not. It didn't matter to me if I wasn't staying, and since Jean had faded away, finally leaving me alone, I didn't want to bring her back to ask questions.

My work was finished until the layout was done and I had to approve it to go to press. That meant I had time to go back to my investigation. I tried Googling the name Jean gave me for the electro man, but I didn't find anything. He hadn't become famous enough to be written about. I had to go to the newspaper morgue, in a corner of the press room, to find the issues that had covered the arrival of the sideshow, since the paper wasn't digitized that far back. In her articles, Jean had tried to make the sideshow performers sound ordinary, so there was no mention of their powers. I flipped through the next year's issues and found an article about his wedding, but that didn't tell me anything about who his children and grandchildren were.

The sound of jangling bells interrupted me, and I went back to the front office to find Felicity Wilson there. "Um, hi," she said. "I'm Felicity Wilson. I work for Mr. Keating? We met the other day?"

And we'd seen each other at the restaurant the night before, but I decided not to mention that. "Yes, I remember. How can I help you?"

"Mr. Keating was supposed to have had a meeting with Paul Ogden about getting the paper's endorsement. He'd like to see about scheduling that with you."

"I only wrapped up Mr. Ogden's last issue," I said with a shrug. "That paper's been put to bed. I won't be working on the next issue, so I'm not in any position to give an endorsement. He'd be better off meeting with the newspaper board. They're more representative of the community."

She winced, as though anticipating her boss's reaction to that. "I'm not sure that's what he wants."

“It’s hardly unusual. With most papers, candidates meet with the editorial board to seek endorsements.”

“He said he wanted a meeting with the editor, and soon, since the primary is coming up.”

“I’m afraid I can’t help you. I’m leaving town as soon as the roads clear. If the forecast is at all accurate, I should be out of here tomorrow. You need to get in touch with the board. Let me see if I can find a way to contact them.” I flipped through the Rolodex. It was rather quaint having one on the desk. I felt like I was in an old movie. There was something so much more official-seeming about spinning the wheel of cards than clicking on a screen. I found a card for Evelyn. “Okay, this looks like it could be it.”

She took a small memo pad and a pen out of her coat pocket and took down the number I read to her. “Thank you. I’ll pass this on to Mr. Keating and see what he wants to do.”

When she was gone, I went back to digging through old issues, but the newspapers from the 1930s didn’t shed any light on either of my cases. It looked like I wouldn’t solve Carolyn’s death or Ogden’s murder before I left town. Then again, it wasn’t really my job. I was no longer a suspect, so I didn’t have to clear my name. I’d given Wes what I knew, aside from the stuff about ghosts, and solving murders was his job. I wouldn’t even be around to write the articles if I did solve the cases. None of this would be my problem for much longer. A steady drip from the icicles on the awning suggested that it was above freezing, and the forecast that morning had said it would stay above freezing for several days. As soon as the next issue came off the press in the morning, I could head home. This whole trip had turned out to be a nightmare, and I was ready for it to be over.

At the same time, I had a tiny pang at the thought of leaving town, like at the end of a vacation when you’re ready to be home, but you also aren’t eager to go back to normal life. This hadn’t exactly been my idea of a vacation, but it had certainly been a break from routine.

After lunch, which I grabbed from the tiny coffee shop down the block, the laid-out paper came back from the designer, and I went over it with a fine-tooth comb, making sure no lines went missing with article jumps and checking the spelling of every word in the headlines. Jean reappeared to give her approval, and it seemed to irk her somewhat that she didn't find any errors. "Not bad for a greenhorn," she said. "You know your stuff when it comes to reporting, and I could train you in editing." I refrained from telling her that I hadn't been offered the job, since I wasn't sure I wanted her getting involved in the matter. Could she communicate with the board?

I sent the paper to be printed half an hour before the deadline, just as I began to hear activity in the press room. My work here was done. At least, the newspaper side of it. Not knowing who'd killed Ogden or Carolyn might eat at me, but I reminded myself that the cops hadn't solved either case, even with all their resources. Since I was done with the paper, I no longer had any justification for asking questions, which hampered my investigation.

By the time I headed out for dinner, there was just a bit of slush left on the sides of the streets and icy patches remained in areas that had been in the shade. Margarita's was a lot more crowded, with cars parked in front. Margarita didn't have time to chat, though she did have more staff. I was a little disappointed that Wes was nowhere to be found, then alarmed at how disappointed I was. He was one of maybe four people I knew in town. It was like going to a party where you know almost no one, so you end up clinging to the one person you do know, even if you normally would have avoided that person.

Jordan came in and joined me, so I felt a little less alone. "Thanks for dinner the other night," I said.

"It was my pleasure. I guess Wes finally cleared you."

"Yeah, he got proof I couldn't have made it here in time to kill Ogden."

“You’re lucky. Once he decides someone’s guilty, he doesn’t generally let it go.”

“I think he knew I didn’t do it. He just needed to tick off that official box after I found the body and stood to benefit from the death.”

“That doesn’t always stop him.”

“He does seem to hold a grudge. I get the impression you two used to be friends.”

“We were like brothers. Then he got mad at me, and after that, everything I did made him resent me more. He can’t stand that I became successful.”

“Why did he get mad at you?”

He waved his hand in a dismissive gesture. “I’m not even sure, it was so long ago. To be honest, I’m not sure he remembers. He just knows he’s mad. Stay on his good side.”

“I’m leaving in the morning, so I think I can hang on that long.”

“You’re not taking the job?”

“It hasn’t been offered. But I think I got off on a really bad footing here, so becoming the newspaper editor might not be the best idea. There’d always be those who suspect me, especially if the killer isn’t found.” I was convincing myself as much as him.

“Don’t worry, Wes’ll get his man. He usually does. He may be kind of a jerk, but he’s some kind of cop prodigy.”

“I’m surprised he’s not here. I had the impression he ate here every night.”

He shook his head. “He doesn’t do crowds. I think he was eating here during the storm because it was his one chance to do so. Now that the roads are clearing, he’ll be at home.”

“Hopefully enjoying some well-deserved time off.”

Clark Keaton entered, with Felicity in his wake, and he worked his way around the room, shaking hands, on his way to a table. Felicity hovered behind him, looking uncomfortable. She wasn’t the typical political staffer. Usually, they were better at working a room. Maybe she was trying to fade into the woodwork so her boss

would stand out more.

“What do you think about him?” Jordan asked me. He didn’t have to gesture for me to know who he meant.

I shrugged. “I don’t know enough to think. I saw the viral video of him rescuing that girl from the car, and that’s about it. He wanted to meet with me about an endorsement, but I didn’t think a one-issue editor should be endorsing anyone. What do you think about him? You went to school with him.”

“Not really. He graduated when I was in eighth grade. I knew who he was, since he was a big man on campus, but I didn’t actually know him. This seems to be the first time he’s spent much time in town since he graduated. He’d visit his folks, but he wasn’t seen much around here. When he wants votes, he’s suddenly the hometown boy.”

“People could say the same of you,” I said with just enough of a smile that I thought it might not sound like an insult.

“I came back to be with family. There wasn’t anyone else I cared to see who cared about seeing me.”

“But now you’re back and starting businesses here—and no, I’m not writing a story. I’m just curious. I don’t have a hometown, so I don’t get coming back to a town like this when you could go anywhere.”

“I have family here. And I do have homes elsewhere. If I want the big city, I have a place in San Francisco and one in New York. I have a cabin in the Rockies. This is a good home base, and if I can create some jobs around here so there are more opportunities, then I’ll have helped this town.”

“Maybe you should be the one running for office.”

I’d been teasing, but he looked totally serious when he said, “Maybe someday. Right now, I’m focusing on getting the new businesses going, getting my new home finished, and rehabbing the downtown buildings I’ve bought. When everything is done and up and running, I’ll look at what other contribution I can make. I know people are getting tired of billionaires trying to take over,

but there is something to be said for being beholden to no one.”

Keaton came over to Jordan. “Mr. Randall, good to see you,” he said, extending a hand for Jordan to shake. “We agreed the other night not to talk business, but I still would like to sit down with you and discuss what we could do for this district. I’d love to get on your calendar.”

“We can talk, but you should know that I’m not endorsing anyone in any race this time around,” Jordan said. “I’m also not making any campaign contributions. My funds right now are dedicated to getting a new enterprise off the ground and rehabbing some of these old buildings.”

“That’s fair,” Keaton said with a nod. “But I also wanted to discuss some economic development ideas for the region and what I can do in Congress to make these things happen.”

“Yeah, we can talk,” Jordan said, but I got the distinct feeling that he was trying to dismiss Keaton. Keaton was just a bit too over eager, like a puppy desperate to please. “Get in touch with my office to get on my calendar.”

Keaton turned to me. “And I understand you’re still not up for an endorsement.”

“I’m leaving town tomorrow morning. My endorsement would be meaningless.”

“You’re willing to leave before there’s any resolution to Ogden’s murder?”

“That’s a job for the cops, not for me. Someone else will have to follow up on that and all the other projects Ogden had in the works.”

“Well, then, it was nice meeting you, and thank you for stepping in to help get the paper out.”

When he was gone, I said to Jordan, “That was one nice thing about working in a big city. I could go out to dinner without anyone having any idea who I was or what I might be working on.”

“There isn’t anyone in this town who can go out to dinner

without anyone having any idea who they are.”

I laughed. “I guess that’s small-town life for you. Then again, it was the same way on military bases. We couldn’t go out to dinner at the Officers’ Club without everyone in the place stopping to talk to my dad.”

Getting home was looking better and better. Not only would I be able to go out to eat without it being a public event, but I’d also be able to sleep in my own bed without being bothered by any pesky ghosts who wanted me to investigate things. At least, I hoped. I wondered how far Jean could travel, and I wondered if she’d let me leave if I hadn’t solved the cases she’d given me.

Chapter Twenty

I managed to get to sleep and get up the next morning without any visits from chain-smoking ghosts, which made me wonder if I'd imagined the whole thing. I'd always had an active imagination, and I had been under a lot of stress in a strange environment. I'd found a dead body, so it wasn't too crazy that I'd imagined a ghost in the same building. A good psychiatrist could have a field day with the idea of conjuring up an imaginary boss so I didn't have to take full responsibility for a job I was afraid I wasn't quite ready for.

I packed my bag and tidied the apartment before heading down to the newspaper office. The print crew had left several copies of the new edition on the desk, and I flipped through one with a smile. My very first newspaper. If nothing else came out of this trip, I had something to add to my résumé and my portfolio, though I wasn't sure how much finalizing one issue would help me in my job search.

I hadn't been in the office long when the door bells jingled and the board trio entered. "You did a lovely job with the newspaper," Evelyn said. "I realize we forgot to discuss payment, but I believe this would be appropriate." She handed me a check that was more than appropriate. It would cover a month's rent, which gave me a little more cushion for finding a job.

"Thank you," I said, which felt rather inadequate.

"We have some paperwork for you. The tax man does like to

know where our money goes.” She handed me a form, and I sat down to fill it out.

Patricia glanced down at my bag, which sat beside the desk. “You’re ready to head back home?”

“According to the news this morning, the roads are clear, and I’ve already been away a lot longer than I planned. This was supposed to have been a day trip. I just need to get my car back.”

I handed the form to Evelyn and waited for the official job offer I was sure was coming, but she merely smiled and said, “Drive safely. There may still be some slick spots.”

“I’m sorry your time in our town was so fraught,” Lupe added.

“Good luck with your job search,” Patricia put in.

I knew I wasn’t sure I actually wanted the job. I didn’t know about moving to a small town where they expected me to put down roots, and having a job in which I was supposedly the boss but actually answered to a pushy ghost—or in which I felt the need to create a ghostly boss as a coping mechanism—wouldn’t be my idea of career advancement. But it stung that they didn’t offer it to me. They’d said I did a good job with the issue I worked on, so I assumed it must be what Margarita had suggested about the shadow of suspicion hanging over me. I wouldn’t be accepted as the town’s newspaper editor until the killer was caught.

“Go on, say something,” Jean prodded, appearing at my side. “Tell them you’ll stay if they want you.”

I tried to ignore her, pretending she was a pesky fly buzzing around my head. “Well, I think that settles everything I had pending,” I said. “Oh, Clark Keaton may be getting in touch with you about the endorsement. I told him I didn’t feel I could do it as an interim editor.”

“Yes, we’re scheduled to meet with him this afternoon,” Evelyn said.

They thanked me again and left. I put a few copies of the paper in my bag and tidied the desk. Now all I needed was my car. Right on cue, it pulled up in front of the office. Although Wes had told

me it was fine, seeing it actually working was a huge relief. I really was going to manage to escape from this place. I put on my coat, picked up my bag, and headed for the door, only to find my way blocked by an angry ghost.

“You’re leaving?” Jean said.

I knew I could probably walk right through her, but she looked almost solid, so I pulled up short. “I got the newspaper done,” I said, hoping Wes couldn’t see me talking to thin air from where he stood outside.

“But you didn’t solve either of the cases, and you call yourself a reporter?”

“Yes, I call myself a reporter, not a detective. Solving murders is a job for the police, not the press, and I think Lieutenant Mosby is perfectly capable of doing the job.”

“You have to find the real killer to clear your name so they can offer you the job.”

“If they really believed in me, they’d have offered the job anyway.”

I braced myself to plow through her to get to the door and shivered as I passed through a wave of cold. I put on a smile before I opened the door and went outside. She didn’t follow me, which made me wonder if she was limited in where she could haunt.

“Here’s your car,” Wes said, not quite looking at me and shifting from one foot to the other as he held the car door open for me.

“Thanks,” I said, coming around to the driver’s side. “I mean, for everything, like taking care of the car and making sure I had a place to stay.”

“Though maybe not for making you stay so that you got stuck in an ice storm.”

“Well . . .” But I had to smile and add, “Actually, it wasn’t too bad, almost a mini vacation. But it is good to go home. How much do I owe for the repairs?”

“Like I told you, there was nothing to repair.”

“What about the towing fees?”

“It was towed and inspected as part of a police investigation.”

I wasn’t going to argue with that. “That certainly takes down the suck level of this week.”

“You’re heading home?”

“Yeah. I’m running out of clean clothes and tea.”

“What about the job?”

I tried to keep my voice steady as I said, “They didn’t offer it to me.” I hated how much that bothered me.

“They probably will, and I hope you’ll consider it if they do. I think you’d be a great editor, and I think you’d enjoy the town.”

That was a switch from my first day in town, and he even sounded truly sincere. “I thought you suspected me of being so ambitious that I’d murder to get the job.”

“It wasn’t so much that I suspected you as that I wasn’t entirely sure of your innocence. And I tend to be suspicious in general.”

“That’s probably an occupational hazard for you.”

“Yeah, I suppose so.” Whatever vulnerability he’d shown for a moment vanished instantly. “Well, drive safely. Call if you need anything.”

I tossed my bag in the back seat and got in the car, and he shut the door for me. I adjusted the seat so I could reach the pedals, put on my seat belt, put the car in gear, and waved as I pulled out of the parking space. Since I had a cop watching, I didn’t make a U-turn, instead turning right at the next intersection, turning right again, and driving several blocks before I turned back to Main Street and headed out of town.

As I drove through the town, I found myself studying it more intently than I had on my way to the interview that never happened. Even with what I knew now, it still looked like the hometown of my dreams. I was sad to leave, in a way. Maybe it could have worked out if it hadn’t been for the murder. I may have felt worse that I hadn’t been offered this job, after all, than I had when I’d lost my old job. I laughed out loud at the realization that,

after spending the past day telling everyone that I wasn't sure I wanted the job and didn't think I was cut out for small-town life or putting down roots, I was now wistful for what might have been if the interview had actually happened. Were those three witches using reverse psychology on me? At the rate I was going, I'd soon be begging them for the position.

Solving Ogden's murder and, while I was at it, Carolyn's would certainly strengthen my bargaining position. I knew that Ogden had been planning to leave after I joined the staff, which suggested that he thought he'd be able to get another job. In the current journalism job market, I suspected that the fastest way of moving up and out would be to break a big story. Was that why he was interested in Carolyn's case? The murder of a high school valedictorian nearly twenty years ago would only be newsworthy outside this town if it involved a person who was newsworthy outside the town—and there were several people who might be on that list.

I doubted it was the actor or the football star. They might have killed Carolyn, but neither of them had been in town at the time of Ogden's murder. I supposed they could have hired someone to silence him, but his death didn't look like a professional hit—unless it was so professional that they were able to make it look like an accidental killing.

But there was Jordan, the tech billionaire. And there was Clark Keaton, the rising-star politician and famous hero. It would be national news if either of them had killed a girl years ago and had covered it up or kept it quiet all this time. The reporter who solved the old case and broke the story might get enough attention to wrangle a job. And it might be worth killing again to stop that story from getting out.

Jordan seemed less likely to me. He was in the wrong class to have been at that party. I seriously doubted that a nerdy freshman would have been anywhere near there. And he had less to lose. He already had his fortune. He had those vague ideas about maybe

running for office in the future, but I didn't think he'd sounded particularly ambitious. I doubted there was any hard evidence tying him to Carolyn's death, or it would have come out by now. Ogden only had the slightest clue that it might have been murder because he'd been tipped off by a ghost, and that wouldn't hold up in court. Jordan could afford the kind of lawyers who'd be able to keep him out of prison. He might lose some public standing and his chance at political office, but he could console himself with his piles of money. Murdering Ogden would only have made matters worse for him. Then again, it didn't look like Ogden's murder had been premeditated. The killer might have lashed out without thinking, in a panic about his past coming back to haunt him. I couldn't entirely take Jordan off my list.

Meanwhile, the merest whisper of scandal could be deadly to a politician. Even if the case never went to trial, an article suggesting that he could have killed someone would tarnish his image. I shook my head. Keaton hadn't even been on my suspect list before I started thinking along those lines. He hadn't been at the graduation party, so he was an unlikely suspect for Carolyn's murder, and he hadn't been seen in the area around the time of Ogden's death. I hadn't found anything in Ogden's stuff that suggested he was considering Keaton as a suspect. I'd have expected a file of clippings about him if Ogden had been digging into his past.

Maybe Ogden had been working on something else, in addition to Carolyn's case. Jean had sounded disgusted with him, so she might have tipped him off about Carolyn Stevens but he was too sidetracked about his own project to investigate an old death that probably wouldn't get the kind of attention he craved. Carolyn's death might have had nothing to do with Ogden's murder.

That led me back to Jordan, as the town's biggest celebrity. It was already public knowledge that his sister was severely disabled due to a wreck that had happened when he was driving, so I doubted that was the scandal. Had Jordan stolen the code that he

turned into a billion-dollar app? If that was the case, surely the person he'd stolen it from would have made a fuss. Maybe he'd paid that person off, but then would it be that big a deal if he'd bought technology that made him a fortune?

I reached the river and the bridge that led out of town. It wasn't too far from here that Carolyn's car had been found, all those years ago. On impulse, I turned on to the side road that paralleled the river and drove to approximately the right spot—or my best guess at the right spot based on the rough map that had been in the newspaper article. There was a broad, level area just beyond the shoulder, and I pulled off there. I hoped there was enough gravel that my car wouldn't sink into the mud left from the ice storm. The last thing I wanted was to need to have my car towed again.

I got out of my car and looked around. It seemed like a good place to pull off the road and talk—or do other things—but an unlikely place to run off the road. There was plenty of room on the shoulder before the slope down to the river bed, and there was only a gentle curve to the road. You'd have to be driving really fast and be really unaware to get all the way off the road and down that incline, or else possibly be rammed from behind and run off the road. The cops at the time surely would have been aware of that. There would have been collision damage to Carolyn's car if someone else had hit her, maybe skid marks on the road or tire tread marks in the dirt if she'd lost control, probably debris from damaged lights. I supposed it was possible that something had changed since then. They could have altered the layout and made it safer—possibly even because of this incident.

I walked around my car to see how far it was to the river, and then I saw her. A girl sat on the slope, her knees bent and her arms wrapped around her legs, hugging them against her chest. I started to call out to her, but then I noticed that she was wearing a strappy sundress. The sun was out and it was reasonably warm for February, but I doubted anyone would be sitting out in a sundress. I was fairly certain this was Carolyn Stevens. She looked just like

her yearbook pictures.

Was it a ghost, or was I imagining this after spending so much time thinking about the incident that had happened here and its victim? As I approached, the girl turned to look at me. "Carolyn?" I called out.

She stood and brushed non-existent grass off her skirt. She was a lot less substantial-looking than Jean. I could see right through her, and her colors were faded. I might have mistaken Jean for a real person until I got really close, but Carolyn was a mere wisp.

"I can't find my car," she said.

I wanted to scream, but I managed to keep my voice calm as I spoke to her. "I think it was towed away a long time ago. Do you remember what happened to you?"

She shook her head, and her hair blew around her face even though the air was quite still. "Something bad, I think. Can you give me a ride home?"

"You were at the graduation party, weren't you?"

"No, I never went to any parties." She frowned. "Danny dared me to go. Maybe I went."

"He said he saw you there. You stood in the doorway, then left."

Realization dawned over her face. "Yes. I didn't see anyone who would have talked to me, other than Danny, but he was already with a group of guys. I was happy for him, and I didn't want to get in the way of that, so I left. But I didn't go. I sat in my car for a while, thinking about going back in. I was watching for someone I knew to arrive. Well, I knew everyone, but someone I'd be able to talk to. That's the last thing I remember clearly, sitting in my car outside the barn where the party was. Now I just want to go home."

I moved closer to her. Her voice was growing fainter and it was difficult to understand her. "Where was the party?"

She gestured behind her. "At the Olafsons' farm. They have a big metal barn they rent out for parties. Can you give me a ride

home?”

I'd heard this urban legend, about the driver who finds a girl on the side of the road who needs a ride home but who vanishes before they get to her home, and the driver learns from her parents that she died years ago. I figured at least I knew she was a ghost and I wouldn't expect her to still be there when I got her home. She was so fixated on getting home that I doubted I'd get much more out of her here, but maybe being in a car, at least for a little while, might remind her of that night. “Sure. You'll just have to tell me where to go.” I went to the car and opened the passenger door. “Hop in.” She got in, and I shut the door.

As soon as I got in the driver's side, she turned to face me, smiling shyly. “I'm surprised we never really talked before,” she said.

I wasn't sure what to say. I doubted she was in the here and now. She was back to nearly twenty years ago, in another car with another person, and anything I said or did might break the spell. I held my breath, waiting for whatever she said next.

“Yeah, I always noticed you, too. Why didn't you say something before?” She began breathing more heavily and leaned forward, her arms embracing an invisible person. It looked like things were getting hot and heavy, and I wondered if maybe I should leave her alone before I had to witness a really odd sex scene. She jerked backward, like her invisible partner had made a forceful move, but he must have miscalculated the force or the angle because her head banged hard against the metal doorpost. She went limp, then faded away.

It took me a long moment before I started breathing again, and I realized my hands were shaking. Had I just witnessed her murder? No, it didn't look like it would have been a hard enough blow to kill her instantly, but if the person she'd been with had then pushed her car down the embankment, she might have been injured further, and she'd have died of her injuries in the days before she was found. I shook my head sadly. What a horrible way

to go. If the guy actually liked her, it seemed like a really crappy move, even if he hadn't planned to kill her.

But it would have taken some impressive strength to push the car so hard that it not only went down the embankment but also went through the trees and down into the riverbed. If it had just rolled, there were enough spots where it might have stopped. The car pictured in the articles had been shoved with force. And it would have taken strength to shove her against the door hard enough to knock her out—the same kind of force it would have taken to shove Paul Ogden hard enough to kill him.

Strength, like a carnival sideshow strong man would have had.

I felt like I was on the verge of solving the case, and I couldn't quit now. "I'll get you justice," I told the space where Carolyn had been, in case she was still nearby in some form. I started the car and drove back to town.

When I reached the newspaper office, I found that the door was unlocked, even though I didn't see anyone in there. I headed straight for the newspaper morgue. The strong man and the electro man had appeared to be friends in Margarita's old photo, so I looked for the article about the electro man's wedding and found the name of his best man: Jonas Welch.

I went back to the office and searched the name "Welch" in the archives. I found a few, but nobody who fit the situation. They were all the wrong age. Maybe I needed to reverse engineer it from the present. Who was that football pro? That was a reasonable profession for a strong man.

Or there was a man who'd done an incredible feat of strength who was supposed to be meeting with Ogden. I reeled mentally as fact after fact clicked into place. His aide wrote down a phone number in a notebook instead adding it to the contacts on her phone—and she'd been standing by my car when the electrical system went on the blink, after she'd heard us talking about the murder. The strong man and electro man's families must still have been close. Clark Keaton had a lot to lose if the old story came out.

He may not have murdered Carolyn, but his cowardice had allowed her to die. I doubted this was enough to count as evidence, but I thought it would be a good idea to share my theory with Wes.

I was just reaching for my phone when the bells on the door jingled. I looked up to see Clark Keaton enter.

And I was sitting right where Paul Ogden had been when he was killed.

Chapter Twenty-One

I tried to keep a neutral, friendly smile on my face. After all, if I was right, Keaton had killed Ogden for figuring out that he'd killed Carolyn Stevens. I had no doubt that the same thing would happen to me if I let on that I knew. "Hi! Are you here to meet with the board?" I said.

"I thought you were leaving town," he said. He didn't sound angry or suspicious, which I hoped was a good sign.

"I was, but I barely got out of town before I realized I'd left something behind." I thought my voice sounded tight and strained. I forced myself to release some tension, though that was hard to do while facing a possible murderer. "I'm lucky I remembered before I got home, or I'd have been driving back again. I think the board members are in the press room. Let me go get them for you."

I got out of the chair and headed for the door to the back of the building. I hoped some of the press crew was in there, or the board, or something I could hide behind, or maybe I could run out the back door and find help. At least I was out of that chair, so he couldn't shove me into the table like he might have done to Ogden.

"Don't worry about getting them. I'm early," he said. He sounded casual enough, not like he was confronting someone who knew he was a murderer. He gave me a sheepish smile. "While I've got you, there's something I'm curious about."

"What is it?" I was near the light switch by the rear door, and I flipped it on. That should make anything happening in the office

visible to Ruthie across the street. I hoped she was at the window and not so absorbed in her painting that she didn't notice. Then I ambled in the direction of the desk so that I was framed in the window. Fortunately, the blinds were open.

"I heard they recruit editors based on their ability to communicate with the dead."

My heart began pounding so loud I was afraid he'd be able to hear it, but I tried to give a carefree laugh. "Seriously? No one said anything about that to me. I did once do an article about a haunted restaurant, but who believes in ghosts?"

"I'd take offense under other circumstances," Jean said, suddenly appearing in the desk chair. "But I can see you're in a pickle. Congratulations on solving the case." I forced myself to focus on Keaton instead of staring at the chair.

"You haven't had any visitations or messages from Ogden, or anyone else?"

"No. Ogden didn't even leave a list of what articles he wanted on the front page." I gave him a theatrical frown. "Does this have anything to do with that sideshow thing? Is there a medium in town who says the place is haunted, who gets messages from ghosts?"

It was his turn to give a nervous laugh. "Yes, this town does have some interesting legends." I relaxed a little as I got the impression I'd convinced him. His main worry now must have been that I'd think he was crazy for talking about ghosts, which could still hurt his chances of getting elected, though it wouldn't be as harmful as a murder accusation.

He didn't really have anything to worry about, though, since I had no evidence, only a suspicion. Maybe the police had found his DNA on Ogden and it would come out when the test results came back. I'd covered enough police cases to know that wasn't as instant as it looked on TV. It could be weeks or even months before they got test results, especially in a town where they'd have to send samples away to a lab somewhere else. I didn't think I could

go to the police and accuse him just on the basis of him maybe being descended from the strong man and having a person who channeled electricity as a sidekick. Even if they didn't laugh at me, that would only give them an avenue of investigation to pursue. It wouldn't even be enough for them to get an arrest warrant. I had nothing connecting him to Carolyn's death other than the fact that it provided the motive for killing Ogden.

"Was there something else you needed?" I asked. "I didn't find that phone charger I thought I left down here, so I need to check upstairs and then get back on the road."

"Do you have other job prospects if you don't take this one?"

Oh dear, he really was worried I was on to him and might get the story out elsewhere. "I just got laid off Monday. This was going to be my first interview. I haven't started job hunting in earnest yet. I'm not even sure I'll stay in journalism. From what I hear, public relations pays better and has better hours."

He was between me and the door, and I didn't think I could get past him to get to my car. I might be able to get into the press room, but then I'd be out of public view, and I didn't know my way around in there. If I could just keep him talking, maybe someone would come along. He'd probably find it suspicious if I made a call to order pizza, so I couldn't use that gambit to call 911. *Someone, please come along*, I thought desperately.

A TV detective would find some way to record him and get him started talking so that he'd have a confession, and that would nail him for both Carolyn's and Ogden's murders. My phone was in my purse, so getting it and turning on the memo recorder would be pretty obvious, and I figured my only chance of escaping this situation was to keep him from knowing what I suspected.

"You didn't find anything he left behind? I'm sure he had notes about my endorsement from a preliminary conversation we had."

"Sorry, the cops cleaned the place out. They took everything out of the desk other than some empty notepads and a few paperclips, and they took a bunch of file boxes out of the

apartment. All I found up there were some old books.”

He kept his politician’s smile in place. “Well, I guess the board and I will have to start from scratch when we meet.” He turned to leave, and I nearly wilted with relief.

“This must all be a great inconvenience for you, coming at this time in your campaign,” I said, trying to sound sympathetic. I immediately regretted opening my mouth because he turned back and took a step toward me, all pretense at friendliness gone.

“You know, don’t you? Either Ogden left something or the ghost told you, but you know.”

“Know what?” I tried to sound and look innocent, but I doubted I was entirely successful because he kept moving toward me.

The closer he got to me, the more aware I became of just how big he was. He wasn’t built like a body builder, with swollen muscles, but his frame was massive. He really could have been someone from a world with denser gravity so that he had super strength in our world. I took an involuntary step backward, then forced myself to think. I needed to stay in the frame of the window and possibly get him into the frame, too. I wanted to stay on my feet and in a place where I wouldn’t hit my head on anything if he knocked me down. I wondered how solid the walls were—were they drywall or plaster? He could possibly put my head through drywall without killing me, but if the walls were solid plaster and he knocked me against them as hard as he seemed to have manhandled Ogden and Carolyn, my best-case scenario would be ending up in a coma.

Jean ran straight at Keaton. He didn’t seem to see her, but he paused and shivered as though a chill had gone down his spine. That bought me a little time to look around for a weapon. My best option was probably that old telephone. Ma Bell used to make some sturdy phones. But to get to it, I’d have to move away from the window. I glanced out the window and saw Ruthie at her easel. Was there anything I could do to signal distress that wouldn’t tip Keaton off? Semaphore would be pretty obvious.

The few pieces of paper on the desk began flying as Jean put all her energy into blowing them around. That must have been what she'd done to bring my attention to the article about Carolyn. It distracted Keaton again, just long enough for me to give what I thought was the military signal for "danger area." My friends on the base and I used to play war using signals we'd learned from a manual, but that was a long time ago, so I hoped it was something Ruthie might recognize. It was a relatively unobtrusive movement, so unless he was well-versed in military field visual signals he might not notice it.

When he turned back to me, his eyes were so wild that I expected him to turn green and start busting out of his clothes at any moment, and I realized with a sick feeling that Jean's efforts to distract him had only proved to him that there was a ghost in the building. "Someone is here, and they did tell you," he said, his voice a hoarse growl that made him sound more animal than human.

"Tell me about what? Sir, you're not making a lot of sense." I thought I detected movement from across the street out of the corner of my eye, but I forced myself not to look that way, lest I tip him off. I needed to keep him talking. "Do you need to sit down? I could go upstairs and make you a cup of tea. I have the good stuff."

"The ghosts told you about Carolyn, like they told Ogden."

"Carolyn? I don't think I've met a Carolyn since I've been here."

"You know, and you could ruin everything. It's not going to stop, though, is it? Everyone who comes here will learn."

Playing innocent had lost all effectiveness, so I switched tactics. "Carolyn liked you."

He froze, and sanity returned to his eyes as they filled with tears. "You talked to Carolyn? Did you tell her I didn't mean to do it? It was an accident. I forgot how strong I get when I'm excited."

"You could have helped her. You didn't have to leave her to die."

“She would have died anyway, or been a vegetable, and I know she wouldn’t have wanted to live that way. She was so smart. There was no point in ruining two lives, so I got out of town. There are people here who read minds. They’d have known. I kept waiting for someone to say something, but I didn’t expect it to come from a ghost.” The words burst out of him like sobs. He must have been carrying all that with him all these years. I imagined that had weighed heavily on him, though obviously not enough for him to confess, and that made him a lot less sympathetic.

I wished I had a way to record this because I was getting a good confession. Would I be able to testify in court, or would that be hearsay? “And so you killed Ogden to shut him up. You couldn’t let him ruin your image as a hero.”

“I didn’t mean to kill him, either. He was just so smug, like he knew he had me, and I got mad and pushed him.”

“Are you going to kill me, too? I already told people about my suspicions. Lots of people. I gave Wes Mosby the stuff on Carolyn’s murder that Ogden had and told him the ghost brought it to my attention. He’ll know if something happens to me that it was because of that.” At least, I hoped so. He’d acted like it was significant that the article had followed me around. Did he know about Jean?

“I don’t want to kill you, but I can’t let this story get out.”

“I wasn’t planning to write anything. I don’t have any evidence, just a guess and some things some ghosts told me, and who’d believe that? But if there’s another death, it’ll probably come back to you.”

“I can’t take that chance.” He rushed at me, but before he reached me, the door flew open so quickly the bells barely had a chance to jingle, and a streak of brown fur flew inside, right at Keaton. Fitz got his teeth into his sleeve and threw him off balance so his hands missed my neck. I jumped out of the way as Ruthie came up behind him and clubbed him with one of her crutches. He lost his footing and hit the floor. At Ruthie’s order, the dog sat on

him.

“You okay?” Ruthie asked me.

“Yeah, he didn’t touch me, thanks to you and Fitz.”

“I guess it pays to have a former military dog retrained as a service dog. Good boy, Fitz.”

“Yes, the very best boy,” I agreed heartily.

But it turned out that even a trained German shepherd was no match for a strong man in a berserker rage. Keaton flung the dog off his back and lunged at me, knocking me to the ground. I threw my hands up so he couldn’t get a good grip on my neck and writhed as frantically as I could to get out from under him. Fitz jumped on him again, pulling on one of his arms so I had at least that much respite. Ruthie whacked him repeatedly with her crutch. When he turned to try to shove her away, I managed to pull up one knee and kick out, hitting him in the jaw with my heel.

That only seemed to make him angrier, but just then the door opened again and Wes rushed in. As soon as he saw what was going on, he drew his gun and shouted, “Hold it right there. Everyone freeze.”

Even the dog went still. I was surprised that Keaton stopped trying to strangle me, but he’d responded to the voice of authority.

“Lexie, move away from him,” Wes ordered, and I scrambled away, putting the desk between Keaton and me. When I was safe, Wes asked, “Can someone tell me what’s going on here?”

Rubbing my neck, I said, “Keaton killed Ogden because he’d figured out that Keaton killed Carolyn Stevens. And then he tried to kill me because I figured out both.”

“I saw that she was in trouble from across the street, and Fitz and I came to help,” Ruthie added.

From his position on the floor, Keaton said, “It was an accident. I didn’t mean to hurt Ogden or Carolyn.”

“This doesn’t look very accidental,” Wes said, kneeling with a knee on Keaton’s back. He holstered his weapon and handcuffed Keaton.

"It's a good thing you called the police before you came over," I said to Ruthie. She opened her mouth to say something, glanced at Wes, then said, "Oh, yeah, I thought that would be a good idea."

"Thank you all for coming to my rescue," I said.

"You should have called me when you figured it out," Wes said, yanking Keaton to his feet.

"That was right about the time he showed up. I didn't get a chance."

"And that's why they call you 'Lucky Lexie'?"

"I was on the scene for the story," I said. "That's how my luck works. It doesn't mean I don't get in trouble."

He called for transport assistance on his radio, and soon a couple of other cops showed up and took Keaton away. He seemed docile enough now. I wonder if his strength only became superhuman when he got an adrenaline surge.

I knew I was losing my strength now that the danger had passed. I leaned against the desk, and Wes caught me by the arm and moved me over to the chair. I would have preferred to stay in his arms a moment longer because I needed the human contact, but getting to sit down was also good. I'd just sunk gratefully into the chair when the door opened and the board entered. "Oh my! What happened?" Evelyn asked.

"Lexie caught the killer," Ruthie said.

"I figured out the killer. I'm afraid he caught me," I corrected, rubbing my neck. "It seems that Clark Keaton killed Carolyn Stevens, and that was the story Ogden was counting on to get him a job somewhere else. He must have gloated, and Keaton snapped and killed him. Really, it was just a hunch on my part because I figured it would have had to be someone really strong, and I was looking up who might be descended from the carnival strong man. But he confirmed my hunch rather spectacularly." I didn't think that letting on that ghosts had pointed me in the right direction would be a good idea. At least, not officially.

"I suppose that meeting for the newspaper's endorsement isn't

going to happen now,” Lupe said.

“We are definitely not going to endorse him,” Evelyn said.

“I’m going to need to get a formal statement from you,” Wes said to me.

With a weary sigh, I said, “Let me guess, you don’t want me to leave town.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

“I don’t think this paperwork will take as long as confirming your alibi did, but I don’t think you’re in any condition for long-distance driving,” Wes said.

I had to agree with him. I had to cross my ankles to keep my legs from shaking, and I felt woozy. I wasn’t sure I could walk across the room, let alone make a two-hour drive.

“I’ll pop upstairs and make some tea,” Evelyn said. “She could probably use it after this ordeal.”

That snapped me back to some degree of alertness. I might be shaken, but that didn’t mean I was willing to take whatever tea she found in the cupboard. I reached into my purse and selected a tea bag. “Here, use this.”

“Are you up to talking now?” Wes asked.

“I think I can manage.” I told him how Keaton had somehow become suspicious that I knew something and attacked me, confessing to having accidentally killed Carolyn and then Ogden. “You might want to look at Felicity, as well,” I added. “My guess is that she’s descended from that electro man. She was next to my car when the GPS got wiped and the electrical system blinked out. I don’t know if that’s a real power or if she just knows something about electronics. It looks like there’s always been a tie between the strong man and the electro people.”

“A good jolt helped the strong man gear up for his superhuman feats,” Lupe said. “And you are correct about their ancestors’

bond.”

“Those are some pretty big logical leaps,” Wes said, shaking his head. “And some serious craziness. I can’t put it on a police report that he has super strength and his assistant has electrical powers.”

“I know,” I admitted. “It was just a crazy idea until he started talking. I only wish I’d been able to record his confession.”

“If we don’t find any evidence, we may not be able to get him for more than assaulting you unless he confesses to us, but that should keep him out of political contention.”

“These days? I wouldn’t bet on it,” Patricia muttered. “But if they find out he’s been quiet about Carolyn all these years, this town will never support him. How could he have lived with himself, knowing what happened to that poor girl? He let her parents stew for days, wondering where she was, while he went off on a trip.”

“He said she would have been a vegetable even if they’d saved her, and there was no point in ruining two lives,” I said.

“And how would he have known that?” Lupe said. “He was just an idiot kid, not a doctor. What he did was worse than murder, in my book.”

Wes turned to Ruthie. “How much of this can you corroborate?”

“I didn’t hear the confession, unfortunately, but I did see him attack her.”

“Before you ran over?”

“No, I saw Lexie’s signal.” She was explaining what she’d seen through the window when Evelyn returned with a cup of tea. I sipped it eagerly, needing all the calm restoration that comes with a good cup of tea. It was sweeter than I usually liked, but I figured I needed the sugar after what I’d been through. After Ruthie finished her story, Wes turned to me. “I’m impressed. How did you know to do that?”

I shrugged. “One of my friends when I was a kid found a field handbook in his dad’s stuff, and we used the signals when we

played war on the playground. You play weird things when you grow up on a military base.”

“It’s a pity Paul didn’t get to write this story,” Evelyn said, shaking her head. “It really might have made his career, solving a cold case like that. I suppose now you get to write it, Lexie.”

“No, I’ve got a conflict of interest since I was involved,” I said. “Someone else will have to do it.” And I truly hated that. It was a big scoop, one I could probably sell to a major paper. It might even get me a chance at a new job. If only I’d merely solved the case without nearly becoming the next victim. “But I could do a sidebar about my experience, if you want it.”

“Oh, definitely,” Evelyn said.

Ruthie returned to her studio with Fitz trotting at her side, and Wes went back to the police station to interview Keaton. I felt quite restored by the tea, but when I went to stand up, my legs didn’t cooperate, so I stayed in my chair.

Evelyn glanced at the other board members, who nodded, then she said, “We know you never had a job interview because of the unfortunate circumstances, though as you’re aware, we were already prepared to make you an offer.”

“Yes, that was what made me a murder suspect.”

“The job is still available.”

“Are you offering me the job?” I asked.

“You’ve more than earned it,” Lupe said. “Not only did you do an excellent job completing the latest issue under difficult circumstances, but you solved two murders.”

Evelyn reached into her purse and took out a sheet of paper, which she handed to me. “Here is our formal offer. The position includes benefits, as well as the use of the editor’s apartment, rent-free, including utilities.” The salary was close to what I’d earned as a big-city reporter, but not having to pay rent would amount to a substantial raise.

This time, I didn’t try to argue against taking the job. I really wanted to consider it. “Can I think about it? It looks like I’ll be

staying one more night. Wes is right, I'm not up to driving home today, and I don't think I should make any major decisions right now."

"That's probably for the best," Evelyn said. "But could you let us know by Monday? We'll need to find someone else quickly if you decide you don't want it."

"I'll let you know by then."

After they left, I went up to the apartment, where I promptly fell onto the sofa and drifted into a long nap, from which I woke to find Jean sitting in the nearby chair, watching me. "You'll be happy to know that I can't find Carolyn in the spirit realm anymore," she reported when she saw that I was awake. "Getting justice must have allowed her to move on."

"I think it was more that she was finally able to work through what happened," I said, sitting up and attempting to smooth my hair. "It looked like it was just a make-out session gone horribly wrong. He didn't know his own strength. His real crime was trying to cover it up by shoving the car down the embankment rather than getting help. He must have lived in fear of that secret coming out."

"Especially in this town, where there are people who can read minds."

"I almost feel bad for him. Though not as bad as I feel for Carolyn. What might have happened if he'd just called for help?"

"Don't let yourself dwell on it too much. Now, about that job."

"They did make an offer."

"You should take it. It'll allow you to set a lot of other souls at rest."

"Can't I do that wherever I am? I see ghosts anywhere."

"Yeah, but how many newspapers are going to allow you to track down their stories? And how many places are you going to find people who believe you?"

She had a point. I could imagine telling most editors that I wanted to investigate something because a ghost had tipped me

off. "I said I'm thinking about it."

"Well, don't think so long that you talk yourself out of it. I've got a good feeling about you, kiddo." She disappeared, leaving me alone in the apartment. I looked around at the Art Deco time capsule. I actually liked the place. It already felt a bit like home, and I was getting close to having spent three years in my current home, so it was nearing time to move. I might as well move here. Even if it wasn't like the small towns in TV movies, it would be a change and probably a good experience. I could always move on again after a few years. Or maybe I really would find a home here.

I'd missed lunch in all the excitement, and the adrenaline surge seemed to have left me starving, so I went for an early dinner at Margarita's. "Hail the conquering hero," she greeted me when I entered.

"Don't tell me the whole town already knows."

"It all happened in full view of a window that overlooks Main Street," Wes said from his seat at the bar.

"Yeah, but as far as I know, only Ruthie saw anything," I said, taking the seat next to him. "Otherwise, where was everyone when I needed help?"

"They did see all the police cars later, and by that time everyone was looking out and saw Keaton hauled away in handcuffs. So word got around."

Margarita brought me her namesake drink without me even asking. "You probably *really* need this," she said. "And don't worry about the whole town knowing too much. I got the scoop straight from the source." She nodded toward Wes.

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

"Okay. Still a little shaky. My neck's a bit sore. I'll probably be wearing turtlenecks for at least a week. But I should be able to go home tomorrow—that is, if you'll let me leave town."

"I don't have any particular reason to keep you here, but you'll probably have to come back for the trial, though that will be at the courthouse in the county seat. And it'll be months from now. You'll

be settled in here by then, if you take the job.” His eyes had gone a soft shade of blue, which made him look deeply sincere.

“I thought you believed I was a murder suspect.”

“I didn’t know you then. I think I’m getting a better feel for you now.”

Why was I hesitating about this job? The money was good. I’d have a lot of freedom. It came with an apartment. I liked the people I’d met. And I doubted a town like this would ever be boring. I took a sip of my drink. “You know, I could see myself staying here.”

“I think she’s made up her mind,” Margarita said with a grin.”

“Welcome to Stirling Mills, Madame Editor,” Wes said, clapping me on the back. His hand lingered for just a moment, and as I looked up at him, I decided that there could be a lot of benefits to taking the job.

LEXIE’S ADVENTURES continue in [Case of the Curious Crystals](#).

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About the Author

SHANNA SWENDSON earned a journalism degree from the University of Texas and used to work in public relations but decided it was more fun to make up the people she wrote about, so now she's a full-time novelist. She lives in Irving, Texas, with several hardy houseplants and too many books to fit on the shelves.

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